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# The Raft

Coming of Age in Hitler's Germany  
and the  
Voyage of the U-859

Arthur Baudzus

*Arthur Baudzus has produced a first-rate memoir, telling a compelling, insightful story of growing up in inter-war Germany, and of the rise of the Nazi regime. He relates the ill-fated voyage of U-859 from Kiel to the approaches to Penang, and the harrowing aftermath of her sinking as only a survivor can.*

J.T. McDaniel,  
Editor, *American Submarine War Patrol Reports*

Arthur Baudzus was ten when Hitler came to power and only 23 when the Nazi regime collapsed. In this fascinating memoir, Baudzus recalls what it was like growing up in those turbulent times. Exempt from conscription because of his job in a shipyard, Baudzus later joined the Navy and was posted to U-859 as an electrician for her six-month voyage from Kiel to the Japanese held Malayan port of Penang. U-859, and her cargo of mercury, was sunk by a torpedo from HMS *Trenchant* less than an hour from her destination, and Baudzus had to swim up from the shattered hulk, then spent the next 24 hours floating in the Malacca Straits before being rescued by the Japanese. He was one of only 20 survivors.



Arthur Baudzus was born in the East Prussian town of Lyck. An electrician by trade, he was employed in the construction and repair of U-boats. Later enlisting in the Navy, he served as an electrician aboard U-859, and was one of 20 survivors when she was sunk. Now retired from Siemens as a marketing manager, he has lived in Australia for many years.

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# The Nazi

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Voyage of the U-859

Arthur Baudzus

Riverdale Books  
Riverdale, Georgia

**The Nazi: Coming of Age in Hitler's Germany and the Voyage  
of the *U-859***

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*In memory of the many men I have known,  
who died needlessly,  
not for their country,  
but for some misguided politics*

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## Prologue

“**B**ut he could have been in London and got killed.”

“Well, he hasn’t been in London, so he didn’t get killed,” I replied wearily.

We had been arguing for hours now. My wife was worried. Our son was an international businessman. He frequently sits in aeroplanes travelling to all big cities. Big cities were targets for terrorists, and big aeroplanes, too. Our son was always on the move and could have been in London at any time. London had just been bombed, and there was good reason for my wife to worry.

“I will be glad when this is over,” my wife sighed. “President Bush promised that he will have the problem licked.”

“President Bush doesn’t know. He will never get them licked,” I was getting tired. “He has to stop the provocation that is searing their hatred. Instead of stopping the provocation, Bush is increasing it.”

“But he promised to send more soldiers and reinforcements to fight the terrorists.”

“Not to fight the terrorists, to occupy their country and increase the provocation. He thinks he has to frighten them. Who can frighten a guy who straps a bomb to his belly and is ready to blow himself up?”

“How awful.”

“Yes, how awful. Nobody wants to die cheerfully. One has to have good reason for it, and Bush gives them the reason by occupying their country and fiddling around in Asia.”

Wearily I shook my head.

This world was weird. I could not follow the reasoning of politicians in government. Killing people is illegal. There are strict laws against it, but with a few twisted words, politicians can sweep that law aside and make killing legal. They turn people into soldiers and give them the right to kill.

In boot camp they are trained. They get a rifle and a target made from wood in the shape of a person labelled 'ENEMY' and there they learn to kill a person. They do not know that person, who has done them no harm. They kill because some politician who heads their government has said so.

Once, a long time ago, I myself had been such a soldier. My thoughts went in reverse to capture those times gone by.

For half a century, I have been an Australian.

My son had been an Australian Soldier, killing enemies in Viet Nam. When I was his age, I was a German U-boat man, killing enemies on the high seas until a torpedo of *Them* slammed into our hull, sinking our boat and killing most of my comrades.

At war it always seems to be a matter of *Them* or *Us*. *Us* being the good guys and *Them* being evil, who must be shot. As time went by, living in peaceful Australia, life blurred my vision as to whether I was an *Us* or a *Them*, and I wondered who had the power to determine that and force people to kill each other.

To clear my mind I made a pilgrimage to Mõltenort, a small village north of Kiel in Germany, where there is a memorial for all the fallen U-boat men. As time rolled back before my eyes, I walked along the plates with all those names. Other people were there too, walking, like me, along the wall. Nobody smiled. All faces expressed grief, which six decades of peaceful living still had not managed to erase, for here on this wall are recorded the names of thirty thousand U-boat men who went out to sea never to return.

They were all men in the prime of their lives, the best a nation had to offer, their dreams and expectations cut short by the cruel events of a war. Three of every four U-boat men were to lose their young lives while I am the one in four to survive and see the end of it. Now those men are gone and the grieving relatives can do nothing more than lay flowers at the bottom of the plaque that bears their loved one's name.

## Prologue

But the spirit of all those men seem to be here again. Their presence can be felt. Their souls have been recalled by the eagle, perched high up on the shores of Laboe, who looks out over the waves of the Seven Seas and watches over them. Now their presence at this place is overwhelming. They must be here, for at home I hardly ever think of them and now, here, I see my own feelings expressed in everybody's face. Thinking of my comrades I feel my throat constricting and work hard to suppress a choking sob. Many names here are those of my comrades, men I shared my food and fears and exchanged jokes with. At this place all seemed to have come alive again.

My winged thoughts bridge time and space and re-unite us all again. Once more I find myself in the steel enclosure of our U-boat. There is no sadness here, although it is already mid 1944 and the U-boat war is lost. The bottom of the Atlantic is already plastered with the wrecks of sunken U-boats. Blissfully and unaware we sail over them on our ill-fated voyage. With our long-range boat we sail down along the west coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope and then up north, as once the romantic clippers did a century ago.

There is nothing romantic about our presence. Kill or be killed, sink or be sunk is the cruel motto which these times have impressed on us. All of God's creatures at sea are divided into *Them* and *Us*, but we waste no thoughts on this. We are hunters, and like hunters we jubilate when we are successful.

We are all young, and life is there to be enjoyed. And what a life is there ahead of us! We are heading for the tropics. Swaying palm-trees, sweet fruits and even sweeter girls are awaiting us. Then, suddenly it all comes to a cruel end. A torpedo of *Them* slams into our hull, which had been our home for the past six months. It ends the lives of most of us. Only a very few manage to get out of the sunken boat to live again—the rest of the men have their names on the plaque before me, and their souls are entrusted to the care of the eagle of Laboe until God decides what to do with them...

Quite suddenly my thoughts have winged me back to the present. I am still alive and my name is missing on the plaque in front of me. Stealthily I wipe my sleeve across my eyes and sneak a glance towards my wife to see if she had noticed my moment of weakness. It would not do. I did not cry then, when the chips were down, and I will not cry today, but it still hurts like hell when I think of it.

I had better head home again, where the ghosts of my past can not reach me. I wonder if in the next war I will be an *Us* or a *Them*. Most likely both, but who is going to decide that?

Arriving home did not solve the problem. I could not shake off the thought about my past. It stuck to me like a burr in my underpants, irritating and persistent. Was I different because I grew up in Nazi Germany? Most people I knew seemed to think so, although that fact is never mentioned. I had just been at a memorial with the names of many thousand men who had died for their fatherland.

Did they really die for their fatherland?

What did they achieve?

Now that I come to think of it, they all died for nothing. They simply died because there was a war, and in a war all soldiers are told to kill people they do not know, and who have done them no harm.

I, myself, could be blamed for the death of at least three sailors from the American SS *John Barry* which our U-boat torpedoed, and who failed to survive. I never laid eyes on them, they had done me no harm and, to my regret, they are now dead. What have we achieved?

Nothing.

Then why do we have to have wars?

Most wars are fought to satisfy the greed or vanity of one single man. From Rameses, via Roman emperors, Alexander, Napoleon, Hitler and Bush—they all glamourised conquest and murder to go, as heroes, into history.

The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that our world is ruled by predators to whom a human life is a disposable component in our society.

Everybody's mind is programmed by the propaganda of their country. Outsiders were made to believe that Hitler was a madman and Germans were stupid idiots to follow him. History and people's minds get distorted by propaganda, planted by ruthless politicians who bend the truth to make history fit the political correctness of their country.

Germans are not stupid and Hitler was no madman. He was just a politician with some twisted, devious ideas. Some people try to distort history by portraying Hitler by Charlie Chaplin as a cartoon figure. That would mark me as being an idiot, too, for recognising Charley Chaplin's cartoon figure as my leader. None of this is true, and I want to prove that everyone is vulnerable to political persuasion.

Hitler was just a politician, with as little regard for human life as the ones that rule the world today. Before the war, Hitler was worshipped like a supernatural creation, because he was a good leader. Apart from his oratorical skills, there was not much unusual about him. There is something wrong with this whole world. Hitler considered wars an essential component of human civilisation. The whole world shares his view, otherwise they would not spend most of their money on weaponry. In the early thirties England built big battleships. Japan built them even bigger. The USA built them bigger still, so Hitler built the *Bismarck* which was the strongest of them all.

Since 1945 the world had been at war at all corners and remains so until this very day.

If we want to make this Earth a peaceful, habitable place, we have to take a closer look at ourselves.

I have lived longer in Australia than in Germany, but when hearing that I had been a German once, people looked at me suspiciously, wondering if at one time I had carried a swastika banner, or if I was still a Nazi. I and my family are fully assimilated and accepted by everyone who knows us as proper Australians, but it disturbed me that the word "German" is synonymous with Nazi.

Well, what was a dreadful Nazi like?

I grew up in Nazi Germany, so I should know. Well, what made us follow Hitler into this abyss, like stupid lemmings on a suicidal march?

What was Hitler like in the eyes of the German people?

I should have an answer to these questions. Was I a Nazi when I lived in Germany? I certainly was a soldier on a U-boat flying the *Kriegsmarine* (Navy) ensign brandishing a swastika in its centre. Thinking about my past personality, even today, it is still confusing.

On mentioning the word "German," people think of concentration camps and Jews. Yet those atrocities happened sixty years ago.

History is full of violence and atrocities, committed by all nations. It is not only Nazi Germany and Auschwitz that screams to Heaven. Hitler and his henchmen, with their slaughter of the Jews, did not have a monopoly on Holocaust procedures. All strong nations holocausted people, too.

King Leopold of Belgium killed two million Congolese, because they were reluctant to help him with his rubber harvest. The term "Concentration Camp" is an English invention. That institution was to be used to

kill Boer civilians in South Africa, because they had gold and diamonds, and the English wanted them. (And as usual, the Australians unquestioning assisted them).

President Truman killed three hundred thousand Japanese civilians when he holocausted Hiroshima. In one night, British air raids holocausted fifty thousand civilians in Dresden.

The bible records in *Joshua* 6:21-24, "And they destroyed all that was in the city, man woman and child, young and old with the edge of the sword. Only the gold and silver they put into their treasury." —

In today's terms it sounds more like a wild horde of Nazis, on the rampage, but the Bible says it was the Hebrews who did it, in 1451 BC, when they holocausted Jericho. Not that the people of Jericho had done something to offend the Hebrews and had to be punished. They just had a city, land and treasures and the Hebrews wanted them.

Governments are put in place to protect the people, but often they turn into the most murderous predators. Stalin killed sixty million Russians, and Mao Tse Tung killed the same number of Chinese. Pol Pot killed one third of the Cambodian population.

The Australian government knew very well that troops, thrown at the shores of Gallipoli, would trample over the carcasses of their own, and that most of them would not survive, but they went ahead with it regardless. To ease the politicians' consciences, and camouflage the fact that here innocent men had been murdered, the dead ones were showered with posthumous honours. I dare to bet that each one of the dead would gladly exchange his honours for another sixty years of life.

Even today, when terrorists commit atrocities in retaliation to the occupation of their country, the leaders of the occupying forces state steely-eyed and bravely, "They will not get away with it. We will win. We will send more soldiers to foreign lands."

Of course, for them it is easy to be brave. They do not risk their lives. They just have more expendable soldiers killed.

Such is our modern civilization, where war is a necessary component and instead of removing provocations, they increase them.

Winston Churchill called me and my comrades, whose names are on the plaques on the wall, a bunch of dastardly murderers, whilst his own submariners were gallant men. Well, what is the difference? Am I different from a man born in America or England?

## Prologue

I decided to write it all down and investigate . I found that much of your life cycle depended on where you were born.

The stork!—he is the culprit!

In my toddler years sex was a hidden secret. Nobody ever talked about it, and everyone knew that the stork brought babies.

Birth is the most crucial point in your life. I might have been born in England. Born there, I would have been shooting Germans in the war that followed, or I could have been born in Poland, or even in Timbuktu, in which case I might have turned out to be an Arabian camel driver. No one can chose his place of birth. Everybody's life line starts at the very moment of birth, where he is unchangeably labelled, and there I will begin.

This is the story of my life, in which I behaved, I believe, as any American or Englishman would have done.

## Part One Growing up in Nazi Germany

### Chapter One The Toddler

**M**y life line starts in Lyck, a dreamy provincial town in far-off East Prussia, near the Polish border.

That part of the world has a distinct atmosphere for me. In prehistoric times it all had been a dense pine forest from the Danube up to Scandinavia, including all of Russia, with a deep valley in its midst. The land was inhabited only by mammoths, bears and sabre tooth tigers. Then came the Ice Age, with mighty glaciers covering the land from the North Pole down to Poland. There were still no people. When at last the sun warmed up the Earth, the glaciers melted and filled the pine forest valley with water. Today that valley is the Baltic Sea. That melted water also created countless lakes, which now dot the East Prussian landscape like stars in the sky.

The pine forests are still there, mysterious, dark and forbidding. And wild—even today, sometimes a wolf howls in it.

Civilisation came late to this area. The Romans were already decadent when the inhabitants of Lyck still carved their weapons and implements from stone. Even today, in the age of space travel, one can still see horse-drawn carts in Lyck.

Being born there made me a German, and a Prussian as well, which in international eyes is worse than being only a German. Being a Prussian, people in other countries, with their distorted, propaganda-induced image about Prussians, could imagine me being born with a spiked helmet on my head.

None of that is true. I was a normal baby. The doctor took me by my feet like a chicken to be slaughtered and slapped my back. I protested and cried defiantly, like an American baby would have done.

I had good reason to protest. After all, I had done nothing wrong, and did not see why I should be punished, but everyone else was happy because I was the first-born in the family.

Later in life I would often scream again, but then there would be a good reason for it. My father had a leather strap, which hung in readiness to lash me whenever I deserved punishment. Teachers, too, slapped my face without shattering my brain, or used the cane on me without ever knocking out my self-esteem.

Looking back, I find that any punishment I got was well deserved and taught me the difference between right and wrong. To the best of my knowledge, I fail to grasp today how kids can grow up and can become law-abiding citizens when, during their childhood years, they get away with murder and robbery.

I should be grateful for being born in Lyck, because that town was a beautiful place to live and grow up in. The streets were straight, like Prussian soldiers, which implied law and order. Three main streets ran north-south and were crossed by six east-west streets. Around the fringes more streets wormed along, taking the overflow of the population, which was halted in the west, because there the town bordered on a big, deep lake, whilst all other roads out of town disappeared into dark pine forests, where one could pick blueberries in early spring.

Here already Lyck differed from other towns. Today a town would have taken advantage of the beautiful water views, because our town looked down on the lake, but our citizens turned their backyards towards that gorgeous view and rather faced the main road with their front façade.

Another side of the town was fringed by a river. That stream was about fifty feet wide and ten feet deep. Up north the deep winter snow melted in spring, seeped into the ground and supplied the river with crystal-clear, fast-flowing water all year round. Looking down from a

bridge one could see every pebble at the bottom of the river and an angler could hold his bait right under the nose of the fish he wanted to catch. The river was full of fish. The Uklai, about four inches long, swam in shoals of thousands near the surface and could be caught by us kids. At the bottom, hidden amongst some greenery, lured the predatory Pike, two feet long or even bigger, which needed more skill to catch.

At home we were three boys and one girl. I was the eldest and the girl the youngest. One day the girl caught diphtheria and died. Medical service was still very primitive in those days. Doctors by then had disposed of the blood-sucking leeches, but many of them still knew little about the difference between diphtheria and tonsillitis. My sister was diagnosed with tonsillitis until, after her death, the doctor realized his error.

My parents were distressed, of course, but ordered another girl from the stork. That child arrived eight years after my youngest brother was born. By that time I no longer believed in the stork and was already wondering how my parents managed to make a girl just as required.

Thinking back, it seems to me that we must have been on another planet. It was a world where girls still curtsied when greeting grown ups and boys showed respect for their elders. A world where naughty kids could be punished and there were no crimes because the law enforced the law.

But I want to talk about myself and my own birth. That had been back in 1922, when I joined a generation which grew up to adulthood under the wings of the swastika-carrying eagle of the Nazis, and later bore the brunt of the World War II massacre.

As a toddler I behaved like any toddler on this Earth would have. I survived the measles, the whooping cough, diphtheria, and avoided polio and smallpox because my mother had me immunized.

I was blissfully unaware of politics, although all street names in our town reminded us of German glory and our heroes like Hindenburg Strasse, or Kaiser Wilhelm Strasse, Bismarck Strasse, and all the others.

Besides that, Lyck was a garrison town and trained soldiers for the German cavalry. That still had nothing to do with politics, and the soldiers were only visible on weekends, when they walked with a nubile girl hooked into their arm at the sea promenade. All along that lake shore a footpath was paved, and the promenading soldiers made a spectacular picture with their starched, grey-green uniforms, and their ceremonial sabres hanging from their belts. No wonder they were irresistible to the

girls. They also could walk into the nearby pine forests for more adventures, like picking blueberries.

I also failed to notice that Germany was poor—it was a beggar nation. The Treaty of Versailles dictated that Germany pay a hundred billion dollars in reparation cost to the Allied countries and nobody had that much money. I did not know that. My Father had a safe job at Telecom, struggling for middle class, and my parents kept me isolated. For me it was a happy life.

Besides catering to the garrison, Lyck was a cobble-stoned market town. On Saturday, farmers from the surrounding district brought their produce on horse-drawn carts to town and sold it from their rear-to-kerb wagons direct to the public. There, in the shade of the tree-lined, wide cobble-stoned main street, were also stalls in rain-proof tents on both sides, with toys where we children could buy hand-held windmills, or noisy whistles for a penny, if you had that much money. Colourful ice cream was dispensed for five pence a wafer-cup or cone from a two-wheeled wagon by the ice cream lady, who had her permanent place in front of the church.

All along the street, on both sides, hundreds of people walked and could inspect or buy the farmers' produce. They offered for sale potatoes, butter, eggs, or the chickens who laid them. There were even giant catfish displayed, which the farmers had caught in one of the many lakes.

Market day always was spectacular when Mother went out to do her weekly shopping and always brought a lolly home. Then a thousand people walked the streets, with a hundred horses ponderously looking on as they chewed their oats.

The struggling of Germany was only felt by those who had to suffer from it because they were unemployed. They had to go *Stempeln*. I suppose that meant that they got a stamp in their papers in exchange for some dole money. It could not have been very much, because they were forever complaining.

I vaguely remember that many men were unemployed, for they stood idly on street corners. It must have been hard on them because winters in the east could be biting cold. When my father came home from work on winter evenings, there were icicles dropping from his moustache. Fortunately, at home in winter, we always had a nice coal fire burning and he soon melted and warmed up.

Life became more exciting in the early thirties. Slowly and in time,

while I was growing out of my toddler shoes, politics had become violent. Governments never lasted long. There were new elections every year, posters glued to the walls screamed for votes, and people were divided into Communists, Sozis (Social Democrats), Nazis, and a dozen other parties. People took sides and argued in the streets. Even aircraft threw "how to vote" leaflets from the sky and we kids collected them eagerly. People had to vote, but so far no government had an answer on how to pay a hundred billion dollars from the treasury of a country that was bankrupt.

All parties except one, that is. Hitler promised to solve the problems of the nation within five years, without specifying exactly how it would be done. He sounded believable, and his followers were proof of it. They marched in neat uniforms to pipe and drum music in the streets—a picture of law and order in these uncertain times.

The name of Hitler's party was cleverly chosen: *National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei*.

National means German and implies no world ambitions. Socialistic is good too. It means security for all people who have not much ambition and little incentive to work. *Deutsche* again means national, and again implies no world ambitions. *Arbeiter* means workers, which means masses and provides votes, which Hitler needed to get a seat in government.

So the Nazis marched towards victory.

The Communists marched, too, but in wild hordes, not with military precision like the Nazis. All they had to offer was a promise to take the money from the rich and give it to the poor. That was a primitive solution, but many fell for that and they got votes. However, with every election, the Nazis inched ahead of the unruly Communists and the unsuccessful Social Democrats.

Wherever the marching Nazis clashed with the marching communists there was violence and even shooting. Afterwards there were corpses lying in the street. In parliament the Nazi Party was already a force to be reckoned with, but it was the Sozis who had held the lead so far. After an election they always had to form the Government, with President Hindenburg looking on. He had been a good general in the past war, but as a president he, too, had no answers to the problems of the country.

We children, too, became involved. With so many exciting elections, politics could no longer be ignored, even by us kids. Of course we sided with the most spectacular party, the Nazis.

"What is your Old Man going to vote for?" my best friend Hilfi Gross asked me a week before voting time in 1933. I was ten years old.

"I dunno," I evaded and kicked a stone like a football against the wall of our flat building. "Shall we play hide and seek?" I tried to change the subject.

I knew very well who my Father would vote for: the Sozis of course. He had been a soldier in the last big war and the marching of the Nazis did not impress him one little bit, but in front of Hilfi it would be embarrassing to confess to that.

"My Old Man is voting for the Nazis," Hilfi bragged, and wiped the snot from his running nose with his sleeve. He must have had a cold because it was winter and his sleeve was shining like a mirror where he always wiped his nose.

I was envious. I would have bragged too, if I had something to brag about. Hilfi's family lived in the flat above us. His father was a tall man, a uniformed Post Officer and leader in the community.

"My Old Man said I can join the Hitler Youth," Hilfi reinforced his lead in the debate.

"Maybe I'll join your group," I promised hesitatingly. I knew very well that I would not. I had already asked my father for it and got a most emphatic denial. In fact, my father had been very angry that I dared to consider that at all. My parents were Sozis to the core. I was disappointed. If there is a group of youngsters, every kid wants to belong. It is heartbreaking to be excluded from a group.

Apart from that, we kids were blissfully ignorant of what was happening in the world around us. I was already going to school. It was a boys school and I had to walk nearly one kilometre every day to reach it.

In school we learned all about German history, that we were Germans—something to be proud of. No political correctness yet. We learned about our Stone Age ancestors, who were not troubled about political correctness yet. We visited Stone Age sites, where stone implements still could be found. Then we heard about more recent times, in our past—stories of famous knights and chivalry, *Das Nibelungen Lied*—Hermann the Cherusker, a German leader who defeated the mighty Roman army in the Teutoburger Wald. Being a German was truly something to be proud of, even before Hitler's time.

We still knew nothing about the Treaty of Versailles. We only heard that our army had been victorious on all fronts and General Ludendorff

claimed that his forces had been stabbed in the back by the people of Germany, who surrendered when he was still undefeated.

Little did we know about Jews. In 1922 the stork had dropped two boys into Jewish families in our town. They were in my class room. I would not have known that they were Jews, except that their families owned the biggest shops in town and they had black hair. Besides that, they did not participate when we had our hour of religious instructions. All of us were Lutheran Protestants and learned fascinating stories from the bible.

Even Catholics were rare in Lyck. They were somewhat different. Although the Catholic boys participated in our religious instructions, once a week we vacated our class room for one hour of sport in the schoolyard and then all the Catholic kids used our class room for religious instructions. Because there were not enough Catholic kids in town, girls from the girls school on the other end of town came over to join the boys. When afterwards we re-occupied our class room again, it smelled differently. Be it from the girls or the Catholics, we did not know.

Besides that, religion was of little importance. Lyck had a spectacular church in the centre of town and the gigantic bells could be heard many miles away, when they called people to church on Sunday mornings, but few listened. Going to church was not compulsory and few bothered. The church touched the lives of the population only four times. That was for baptising at birth, confirmation at the age of fourteen, then for marriage and finally at the funeral.

So that was how we approached the election of 1933. Our life changed one week later.

Disgusted with the Sozis, who in more than ten years time had not managed to bring some improvement in the life of Germans, the people threw them out. Hitler won the election by a small margin and President Hindenburg asked him to form a new government.

♦ ♦ ♦

In our town boys and girls were segregated. There was a boys public school, which I attended, and a girls public school on the other end of town, as well as separate high schools. So when the Hitler Youth was formed, the same *apartheid* was applicable. *Jungvolk* was available for boys up to fourteen years of age and the BDM (*Bund Deutscher Mädchen*) for girls.

With no television for entertainment, life for modern kids could have been boring, but we had our hands full with inventing outdoor games.

In our back yard there was a little meadow, where the women bleached their washing. It was called The Bleach. There we could roll in the soft grass or we played hide and seek among the sheds, of which every flat was allocated one. The girls skipped rope, or played with a ball, which they bounced skilfully against a wall with their heads, knees or their hands. Every flat had a garden patch, where the women grew vegetables or colourful flowers, and among these flowers we chased butterflies, which were even more colourful.

**T**here was not much outdoor activity in winter, because with temperatures thirty degrees Celsius below, one rather sat in the warm home and read Tom Shark detective stories. The lake usually had an ice cover two feet thick. At places the ice was sliced into big blocks to be stored in cooling bunkers where they cooled the beer all summer, because there was no refrigeration yet.

One could go ice skating, but that was only for those that could afford to own the equipment. That outdoor activity, too, lasted only a few weeks until the ice of the lake was covered under a thick blanket of snow and the lake was white like the gigantic pines in the forest, which were carrying a load of snow on their branches.

Every winter we had plenty of snow, but there were no hills underneath and skiing as a sport was not known to us. So we just built a snowman or had snowball fights. The thick cover of snow was only useful to the farmers, who disposed of their horse-drawn carts and had their horses draw a sleigh instead.

Since in winter there was no rattling of wheels on cobble stones, the horses had a bell fitted to them which rang silvery to warn pedestrians that they were coming.

A winter paradise.

That was what our town looked like when Hitler formed his new government.

**A**t first, very little changed. The most noticeable effect on my life was that my father's attitude softened. Working for the government and Hitler being the government, he no longer could buck the system.

He permitted me to join the Scout Movement rather than the Hitler Youth. They wore a brown uniform, too, but they were not Nazis. That seemed to be a compromise, but it made little difference, because a few

weeks later Hitler absorbed the Scouts into the Hitler Youth. I found myself being a member of the *Jungvolk*, who were the boys under fourteen years of age. Human beings are a tribal kind of mammal and it felt good to belong. All the kids suddenly wanted to become members and be included in that new, uniformed movement.

Soon I learned that I was part of a big organization, like a cog in a big machine which was shaped like a military pyramid. A dozen boys formed a *Schar*. Three *Schars* were a *Jungzug*. Three *Jungzuge* were a *Fähnchen*, and so forth until the whole youth of the country was in the grip of that organization.

At first I did not notice that I was a tiny part of the whole big movement. I was in a *Schar*. My friend Hilfi was there, too. Once a week, after school, we assembled in a room, which we had found in an abandoned windmill. It was at the junction between two lakes of different elevations. The miller had found water power easier to handle and had abandoned his windmill. In that windmill we found an empty room for our meetings.

We learned how to assemble, march like soldiers and obey military commands. Afterwards we joked and sang songs. Some of them funny, others boisterous. Once a month there were bigger meetings where we learned that we were part of a *Jungzug* and even part of a *Fähnchen*.

One weekend our *Fähnchen* assembled for a weekend camping holiday. There we were, nearly two hundred boys. We learned that our *Fähnchen* had a band, which took the lead, and soon we marched to the tune of pipes and drums out of town towards the shores of another lake. The south of East Prussia had many dreamy lakes and places ideal for camping.

Some of us put up our tents whilst a barbecue fire was sizzling. It was all very romantic and adventurous. It was the first time that I was to sleep far from home.

Suddenly a thunderstorm started and drove us into our tents, but it was no use. The tents were built on a slope and soon the runoff water seeped into the tents and we were wet to our skin. Luckily there was a barn nearby, where the farmer let us find refuge and lie down on piles of straw, but the outing had not gone as planned and was spoiled.

At the end of the year the whole *Stamm* (tribe) assembled. That involved the boys of the whole south of East Prussia. In the meantime the membership had multiplied and there were thousands of brown-shirted

boys, all standing well organized according to their rank and divisions. The assembly was spectacular and involved a march with torches in the ancient pagan German tradition. Big swastika banners of every district were grouped together and lined up on one side. It was very impressive to hear the German national hymn sung by a few thousand enthusiastic voices.

It also was very tiring. We had to stand for hours, listening to orator after orator, who all had something to say about the glory of Germany. When I came home I decided to chuck it in. Having to assemble every week was tiring in the long run. Until now I had enjoyed my freedom and I hated the compulsion to be at a certain place at a certain time. Having to attend school was compulsion enough for me. If I could have been a leader, it might have been more attractive, but simply exercising to military commands proved to be boring in the long run.

I simply stopped going to the meetings. In my free time I instead went into the country to help farmers with their potato harvest and earn a few silver coins.

There still was a strong dividing line between haves and have nots. The first four years in school all went to the same class. At the fifth year, one decided if one would take another four years in public school, or transfer to the Gymnasium (high school) for another eight year. There, higher mathematics were taught, along with modern or ancient languages, ending with matriculation for entry into a university.

Those kids attending the Gymnasium were clearly visible because they wore colourful caps. Starting with the red cap of the lowest *Sexta* class they changed colours every year until they ended with the black cap of the *Ober Prima* class, ready for the *Abitur* (matriculation).

In his early years of government, Hitler wanted to equalize people and abolished the colourful caps for the kids, but if you wanted to be a leader in the Hitler Youth, you still had to attend school at the Gymnasium. The minimum requirements for an officer's career, too, was matriculation from a Gymnasium.

At school our education slowly changed and turned more towards political correctness. I was only twelve years old and at reading time we took the Treaty Of Versailles apart. We learned how shamefully Germany had been treated by the Allies and got selected books to inform us even further.

My brother Erwin, who was at school a couple of classes lower, must have got the wrong book.

"They say, it is the Kaiser who is to blame for the big war," he said.

"That is ridiculous, how could he have wanted the war?" I put him straight. "The war started because a Serb shot the Austrian Crown Prince. There is no way the Kaiser could have foreseen that. Unless a gipsy woman told him so."

"But he armed our country long before the war started."

"Of course he did," I agreed. "That was because England and France were slicing the globe up into their colonies, and the Kaiser wanted some slices, too, for Germany."

"And for that you needed weapons?"

"Sure do. All land on earth belongs to somebody. If you want to take it away from them you have to be a bully. The French and English were such bullies, so the Kaiser had to be a bully, too."

"And he got his colonies?"

"Sure did. He wrenched Cameroun and Togo from the Hereroes, Southwest Africa from the Zulus, East Africa from another tribe and the Bismarck islands near New Guinea from some Kanaker tribes. The big war was only a nuisance to the Kaiser. We were bound by treaty to defend Austria. Why would the Kaiser want a war? And see where it got him. He lost everything and we went down the drain along with him."

"Yeah!"

We had good teachers in those days. There was an answer for everything.

It was soon obvious that Hitler's promises were no empty talk. The number of the unemployed dwindled spectacularly. Some went into concentration camps because they were incurable Communists (that party was outlawed). Others, at the age of eighteen to twenty, were absorbed by the *Arbeitsdienst*, where they worked for the government for ten pennies a day. They were uniformed and marched like soldiers, with a spade shouldered instead of a rifle. Joining the *Arbeitsdienst* for one year became compulsory for all eighteen-year-olds, which was okay if you were not an eighteen-year-old.

The word 'Concentration Camp' was new to us. We assumed that it was some sort of jail, where one ended up if one vilified the government. So the teacher warned us.

On the home front there were improvements, too. We had moved from the weather-beaten flat building to a small house of our own. Hitler wanted every German to own his own home and proved that this was not an empty promise. On the fringe of town new streets with little houses were built. Each one was standing on its own half acre block.

A house cost only 2,500 *Reichsmark* and was well within my father's means. They were small. Long after the war I went back for a visit and found that the ceiling height was only seven feet, but as a twelve year old I found them big. For some months before it was finished, we were excited and kept watching the building progress and during that time my father had some alteration done to the standard design.

At last we moved in. My father had a stable annexed and there we had a pig, geese and chickens for laying eggs. After school, I drove the geese to a nearby meadow, where they fattened themselves. I also raised rabbits for the kitchen pot. It was very educational. I had to learn the difference between male and female and how to pair them. They demonstrated to me that the stork had nothing to do with down loading babies. After having lived so long in a run-down flat it was paradise for us youngsters.

All we needed to complete our happiness was a car, but Hitler took care of that, too. He wanted every German to own a car and had the Volkswagen designed. They were not available yet, but there was a savings scheme into which my father paid every week a small amount. In the meantime he had a shiny pamphlet with a picture of his car.

So far there were only four cars in our town. The cobblestone streets were not good enough to drive a car on them, but that could soon be changed. The government built *Autobahnen*, which were cross country freeways, better than anywhere in the world. Soon we would be travelling along those highways ourselves.

Work conditions had improved, too. The workers did not get more money, but they could go on a cruise to the Canary Islands under a scheme called *Kraft durch Freude*, which means joy gives strength. At newsreels we could see a thousand workers waving happily from a cruise ship as they sailed towards tropical islands and adventure. All workers had to be unionized, but the only union available to Germans was government controlled and they alone decided what was best for them.

By 1935 Hitler introduced conscription, which absorbed the rest of the unemployed men. That this was a violation of the Treaty of Versailles

did not matter very much, because a few weeks later Hitler walked out of the League of Nations anyhow. With Germany only as a tolerated member here, that crowd had been a bloody nuisance in the past.

Was Hitler a madman?

Nobody in the world seemed to think so at that time. Whatever he did, he could do no wrong. It was easy to accept him as a leader. A portrait of him hung in every shop window and many people bought it and hung it in their living room, although my parents never went so far, even if he gave them their own house and promised them a car on top of it.

In all those pictures Hitler always looked the same, with his brown uniform, one hand clutching his belt. One could not imagine him flirting with a woman, drinking a beer, sleeping in pyjamas, or having to go to the toilet. He was a creation that stood high above all those human weaknesses.

He was the Leader.

My way to school from the fringes of town was longer now and there my education (in the computer age one would say programming) continued. Our teachers were all male and World War veterans. Being in the final year, my class was taught by the principal of the school. His name was Mr. Kleist and he was a retired colonel of the army. To emphasise his status, he wore a monocle, too. There had been a hero, a General von Kleist, in German history and he liked to imply that this must have been a relative of his.

Under his guidance we took the Treaty of Versailles apart and read every paragraph in it. We did not hate anybody, but it was natural to bear a grudge against people who must hate Germans to tear our beautiful country apart. After all, we did not start the war, a Serb murderer did.

"We are a people without living space," Mr. Kleist taught us. "At Versailles they took away our colonies and large chunks of our country. We have to expand again. The west is overpopulated already, we can not go there, but in the east is room for us. We will expand to the east."

Of course, we knew that in the east were people, too, but that did not matter very much. England and France took colonies everywhere, regardless of the people who lived there. We would just do the same and take possession of the wide expansion of land in the east.

The Russians did not matter. I could see that on my way to school. There I had to pass a billboard which displayed the weekly *Stürmer*. That was the official weekly newspaper of the Nazi Party. There I saw pictures

of Russians described as subhuman beings. They had short-cropped hair, a low forehead and a great, stubbly chin. They looked like apes and I decided that those people needed to be colonized.

The *Stürmer* was an interesting paper to read. I did not read it only because of the Russians. There were juicy stories about race defilement, where a blond, blue-eyed girl has to go to the office of her Jewish boss. There she has to fasten a loose button on his fly and in the process she gets seduced.

Outrageous!

I wished I had a loose button on my fly. In those days we did not have zippers yet. It was all very titillating and kept me interested. I learned that Jews were different. In cartoons they always had long, fleshy noses, although in reality they looked normal when I saw one in the street. The only difference I saw was the yellow star of David sewn to the chest of their outer garment.

At the age of fourteen I felt that I was fully educated (programmed). Fourteen was an important age for us. That was the time when we were confirmed as Christians in the church. It was also the day when we grew up. Before the ceremonies we swapped our shorts for long pants and from there on we were called 'Mister' by anyone who cared to address us.

After this ceremony I left school and became an apprentice, to learn how to be an electrician. Besides that, I was now old enough to join the real Hitler Youth.

Our town had an airfield, a large expanse of level grassland which was used by Hitler's newly formed German Air Force as landing point for their navigational exercises. Often they came in with their military grey-green biplanes. Sometimes there even was an air show, where crack pilots, such as World War ace Ernst Udet, demonstrated loops and rolls. After watching spectacular aerobatics, I walked among those parked planes and discovered that they were made only from wood and fabric and wondered if I could build one of these myself and fly. I wanted to become a pilot like Ernst Udet.

The Hitler Youth had a section to train pilots, so I joined them. On weekends I went to meet them at the military training ground, which was undulating and had some low hills. There my group had a glider for beginners. It had a primitive, open frame with a pair of short fabric-covered wings. The cockpit was just an open seat in front of it.

Three boys, their heels dug into the ground, held on to the tail, two were at each wing tip to hold it level and the rest of us stretched two rubber cables to their limits in front of it. At a signal from the pilot, the tail boys let go and the plane catapulted high up into the air only to land a few hundred metres further down the hill. There were never long flights, because there were no updrafts, and even if there had been, the short wings of the beginners' plane could not have benefited from them.

After each flight, I had to help carrying the glider up to the top of the hill again. After two months of carrying and pulling ropes I gave up. Not once did I get a turn to fly that thing, so, like my turn at the *Jungvolk*, I stopped going to those meetings.

In the meantime I had already learned how to be useful as an electrician. Without difficulty I could find a short circuit that had blown a fuse. One day I was sent to a Jewish lady, who had blown a fuse. Jews generally had the biggest shops in town, but this shop was small and the lady was old. She did not even have a long nose, but the yellow star on her breast was proof that she was a Jew.

I finished the job to her satisfaction and she gratefully gave me a nice green apple. I thanked her for it and put the apple in my pocket. Arriving home, I gave the apple to my brother. I did not want to eat it.

By the time I left school, my brainwashing had been thoroughly completed. A youngster's mind is soft, like putty. It can easily be shaped and impressed by skilful teachers. These early impressions harden and are later nearly impossible to erase.

Hitler held Germany in his spell. Whilst until now we had learned to hate the Treaty of Versailles, we now watched it unravel into nothing. Hitler marched his troops into the Rhineland and repossessed it. Then he annexed Austria, whose people I could see jubilating in the newsreels as they seemed to be pleased that they belonged to greater Germany. It was to become even bigger as other lands, stolen in Versailles from us, were returned to their rightful owner.

Hitler's successes were spectacular.

One day in 1938 all over town some violence had started out of the blue. Shop windows of the large Jewish shops were smashed and the town was in a mess. I thought, smashing shop windows might be fun, especially if there is no law around to catch and punish you, but I had too much respect for private property to be pleased about it.

I did not like the mess and saw no reason to participate, but apart from that I was not overly concerned. I thought, if the Jews are harassed, it is their own fault and wondered why they did not leave the country if they are treated badly here. But then I had read somewhere that a ship full of Jews had sailed to America and was refused entry. They had been turned back and had to return to Germany. It seemed that nobody wanted them.

Anyhow, I did not let that bug me. I had already seen that Jews did not have long noses as in those cartoons. I knew that for a thousand years they had lived here in Germany. Why did they not assimilate? If they still insisted on being Jews, then it was their own fault if they were harassed.

As a person, I was not really given a reason why I should hate Jews. It simply was a way of life in the late thirties. I had two Jewish boys in my class in lower primary school and I had found them no different from me. Nobody in my class treated them different from anybody else. At fifth year they left us and transferred to the Gymnasium along with all the other ambitious or rich kids.

Later, in the Hitler Youth, there were derogating songs about Jews, but still no reasons were given why they should be treated differently. Stories circulated that they got rich because they were cheats, but cheats existed anywhere. The Jews had no franchise on that. Never in my life did I hate the Jews, nor did I meet people who hated them. I might have been biased by stories in the *Stürmer* and have the feeling that they were inferior to us Aryans, but I never hated them.

To us they were portrayed as ruthless money lenders, who lent money to farmers and then foreclosed the mortgage to steal their land, Hitler put a stop to that by introducing the *Erbhof Gesetz*. That was a law that protected farms, which had to remain in a family. They could not be subdivided and always passed on to the eldest son.

The Film *Jud Suess* also did some damage to the Jews. It portrayed a Jewish moneylender and a handsome, but poor baron who is an officer in a Hussar regiment. He borrows money from the Jew. When the Jew wants his money back, the poor handsome officer, who had spent all the money on frolicking festivities, had no money and to preserve his honour he shot himself.

Outrageous!

I did not see the point. I thought that if one borrows money one has to pay it back and not shoot himself. Later in life I was to learn that all

propaganda is misleading. (I saw that film again in 1990 on SBS Australian television.)

After the *Kristall Nacht* as that violent incident of window smashing was called, the Jews closed their shops and slowly disappeared from view. I still did not know what it all had been about. Maybe, if I had been an active member in the Nazi party, I would have been informed, but as it happened I remained ignorant about many things.\* The media was government controlled. Whatever we heard on the radio or read in the papers was a fat diet of Political Correctness. Our way of thinking was kept in the proper channels by the government.

Hindenburg was dead. We needed a new President, so there was a new election. But there was only one candidate: Adolf Hitler. I was still too young, so the Oldies voted. Hitler was elected unanimously as the President. He also remained Chancellor.

Now he was the *Führer*.

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\* Long after the war I learned that Hitler himself may have been a Jew. His unmarried grandmother worked in the household of a Jew and became pregnant with Hitler's father (most likely in the same way as described in the story about the loose button in the *Stürmer*). Of course, this was not revealed whilst he was the *Führer*.

## Chapter Two

### The Teenager

By 1939 I was seventeen years old. I had finished my apprenticeship and was a fully fledged electrician now. As an apprentice I had earned only a pittance and now I was getting a full weekly wage.

I felt that at last I had grown up. There still was the danger that I could be drafted into the *Arbeitsdienst*, an organized work force who had to serve the government one year for ten pence a day and I had to look around for another job to prevent that. Simply having a job and earning money did not protect me from compulsory working for next to nothing for the government. Laws in Germany were strict. Easily one could slide into a concentration camp. Everybody knew that and one was always careful not to antagonize the government. Most of us had not known life before Hitler became the government and had no criteria to compare our life with that before Hitler came to power. One simply had to obey the rules or be punished straight away.

Crime in the streets was virtually unknown in Germany. Any would-be criminal was rounded up and jailed or executed. One day a great number of Nazi Party members were executed. We were told that the party cleared their ranks of homosexuals. After the war we learned that in this purge Hitler just killed unwanted dissidents in his own party. The leader of the SA, Ernst Rohm, had become too big for his boots and with his big SA army of men, was a competition to Hitler. He had to be eliminated.

Nobody knew what really happened. The news media was firmly in the hand of the Ministry of Propaganda and nothing was written or said which was not politically correct.

Hitler was well established after this purge. Everything he touched turned to gold. He stopped paying the ridiculous retribution money as dictated by the Treaty of Versailles, a Treaty which he dismantled until Germany was totally free of it.

It felt good to be a German. The Jews with their yellow stars seemed to have disappeared from view and Germany was a good place to live. The country was dominant among its European neighbours.

Germany was strong. In the air it had disposed of the old biplanes and now had the best fighter aircraft. It did not have the most, but the best warships and on the ground the best army in the world. We were respected by our neighbours and could hold our heads up high. We could live happily as long as we did not rock the boat, like criticising the government, but there was no need for that. There were no unemployed men and no criminals in the street. There were no lenient sentences for youngsters who dared to commit a crime. They had no time for crimes anyhow, all were tightly organized in the Hitler Youth and had no urge to form gangs of their own. Any would be criminal was sent to the concentration camp (whatever that could be, we did not know).

Most people were organized in some branch of the Hitler organization, from the work force down to the little boys and girls, who were schooled in the politically correct way.

I had so far evaded being a long term member of anything. Now I joined up again. The NSKK seemed to be attractive to me. It was a motorized branch for men and I hoped to get a driver's licence there and learn to drive a car. I could already ride a motor bike. My father had one and sometimes when he was not home, I pulled it out and went for a ride. I knew how to operate a clutch and gear lever and in those days there were no traffic police on the road, so there was no danger of being found out.

The NSKK turned out to be disappointing again. I did not get a turn to drive a car. At weekly meetings I only had to study the rules of the road. There were hardly any cars around, but there were a hundred traffic signs to memorize for a German driver's licence. As with my previous attempts to join an organization, I stopped going to the meetings.

If one had to write an application form for whatever reasons, one

always had to disclose what organization one belongs to. One was expected to have some affiliation with a branch of that organization. I just wrote NSKK and nobody ever checked up on that.

In the meantime my father had paid out his Volkswagen account, but the car was not yet available. However he still had that shiny picture of his car on the pamphlet and had already decided on the colour of his future automobile.

On my way to work I still passed by the billboard and read the *Stürmer* although there were now other means to keep oneself informed about conditions in the world. The government created the *Volksempfänger*, a radio set so cheap that the poorest household could afford to buy one. It received the local stations nicely, but was not supposed to tune in to more distant senders, such as the forbidden BBC. It had no short wave channels.

Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, had the ear of every single German now. We were all informed, in a politically correct way, what was happening in that naughty world outside.

Nobody knew that this summer would be the last ever for the residents of Lyck to witness their celebrations on the lake. Every year on the longest day in summer, all boats on the lake took to the water at night. Decorated with colourful lampions they went out on the water to the music of accordions and watched the fireworks in an ancient, pagan celebration of the turn of the sun-cycle. It always had been a vital part of the soul of Lyck, whose inhabitants respected their old Prussian stone-age ancestors and clung to their traditions.

As time went by, we learned that Hitler had corrected most of the wrongs done to us by other countries, but there still were troubles. After the last war, Poland had taken a large chunk of land from Germany to gain access to the Baltic sea. That was West Prussia. Many Germans still lived there and still clung to their ancestral land. We were informed that the Polish government treated them badly and every day we learned about new atrocities done by the unrespectful Poles.

Of course, we were duly outraged. How dare a little speck on the map like Poland confront a country like Germany? That must be rectified. That was what we young ones thought. After six years schooling in political correctness, we were thoroughly programmed. I was pleased that day in September when I saw thirty Ju 52 converted bombers flying

over our city towards the Polish border, which was only fifteen kilometres away.

Our town changed instantly.

Our *Volksempfänger* said that war was declared on Poland, and suddenly we were a military town. I saw Mr. Kleist, the headmaster of our boys school in the uniform of a Colonel, monocle aggressively in place, organizing his troops. Many others were suddenly in uniform. There was Mr. Halvas, the supervising electrician who had taught me my trade. I saw him riding in an NCO uniform ahead of a column of cavalry, riding towards the Polish border. I had not known that he could ride a horse, and now he rode proudly ahead of a whole bunch of horsemen. And how aggressive he had looked, ready to slash every Pole to pieces to avenge the poor, mistreated Germans.

Even my father turned up in uniform. Reluctant as he was at the age of forty, he donned a sergeant's uniform and, as a technician, was sent to Poland to restore communications behind the front lines.

I did not escape either. As an electrician, I was drafted to join a gang of linesmen who restored the broken overhead lines of the Polish telephone system. When I crossed the Polish border, the land looked as if a tornado had swept across it and had blown the telephone lines away.

We went into Poland, buckled hooked shoes to our feet and climbed the wooden telephone poles like monkeys. There we spliced the broken wires together again. At night we remained in Poland and slept on heaps of hay in some farmer's barn.

It all did not last long.

After a few weeks the war was over. As expected, the German army had swept across the land. We were told that the Polish politicians had deceived their soldiers. They told them that the German tanks were just plywood replicas to bluff the gallant Polish soldiers. It worked. Bravely rode the Polish cavalry, threatening sabres in their fists, against German tanks and were slaughtered. (From what I have learned of politicians and their way of twisting the truth, that story might well be true.)

The Poles had been taught a lesson. The long-suffering Germans in West Prussia were free. Germany was a bit bigger now and the fact that England and France had declared war on Germany did not bother us very much. If necessary we would teach them a lesson just like we did in Poland.

The soldiers to fight Poland came mainly from the East of Germany. With all men drafted, the country was depleted of manpower, but life had to continue. Our town could not fill my father's job with Polish prisoners of war or other foreign labour. That job was highly classified, so Telekom demanded my father back from the army.

There he was again, demobilized and without a uniform, but with enough leverage to extract me, too, from the gang of linesmen and give me back my freedom.

I had to act quickly now. There was the danger that I could be drafted into the *Arbeitsdienst* for ten pennies a day. I had to obey the law, and if drafted there was no way to evade this, unless I should be drafted into the army, which was equally as bad. If I wanted to outfox them I had to act quickly. I sat down and sent a job application to the Schichau Wharf, which was in Königsberg and built ships for the German Navy. As usual, in answer to the question about organization, I wrote: NSKK. Everybody was expected to belong to some branch of the Hitler empire.

A week later I got an acceptance letter.

Now I was safe from any surprise drafting and went to live in Königsberg.

It was a big step for a small town boy. In those days, in our area, people did not travel much. The farthest most people ever travelled in all their lifetime was within a radius of twenty kilometres from the place where they were born. Just as far as their bicycle would carry them. Only a war could change that. Having ended up in Königsberg already made me feel like a globetrotter.

Life was easy from here on. For lodging I had the choice to rent a furnished room in town, or take a bunk in a barrack on the wharf premises. I could eat in the wharf canteen and was snugly cared for. I was totally safe.

My future place of work was in the section that repaired submarines. Being employed in the armament industry, I could not be drafted for military duty. I would have hated to be drafted into the Army and sent to Poland to shoot people, or worse, to be shot at. One of my school friends already had lost his life in Poland whilst his comrades swept victoriously across the country.

I wanted no part of it.

Here I did my job and was not touched by any events outside my perimeter. On weekends I could go out exploring Königsberg, which had

a rich Prussian history. Here all the Prussian Kings had been crowned and the philosopher Immanuel Kant had breathed the same air as I. For the first time I had a ride in a tram, which were to be seen only if one lived in a big city. I felt like a country bumpkin on his first trip to town. On weekends I could go rowing a boat on the Schlossteich, which was a little lake in town.

There were even more adventures possible. On Sundays I could take a train and go to the Baltic Sea, which was not far away. There on the sandy beach one could find amber pieces washed ashore from the ancient bottom of the sea, or admire sunbathing beautiful girls, of which there was no shortage.

Out somewhere the war continued. My *Volksempfänger* said that our army swept across France as previously in Poland, and there were more casualties among my school friends.

Then war was declared on Russia. Many doubted the wisdom of this move. It reminded them of Napoleon and his exploits, but Hitler seemed to know what he was doing. Our army continued their sweep across Russia, too, with unreduced speed until the winter stopped them short of Moscow. I heard it all on the radio, but saw very little of the war. To me the war was just a nuisance and I would have liked to see the end of it, if only England would stop pestering us. All these military successes could not hide the sad fact that more and more of my school friends were listed as fallen in action and I would never see them again. They just were reduced to a part of my memory.

The Jews had disappeared from sight and nobody wondered what happened to them. Maybe they had found another country, but it did not matter. Nobody talked about them any more.

One day I saw a bunch of Russian prisoners of war who had come to do some excavating for an extension of the wharf. I was very surprised to see that they looked not at all like the Russians as I knew them, but very much like us Germans and not like some ape-like creatures as the *Stürmer* had pictured them. They were dressed in brown-green felt coats with fur caps on their heads and when they saw a garbage bin they ran to it like animals, to see if there was anything to eat in it. We civilians did not get much to eat, but I had never known what hunger was. I thought I would never stoop so low as to look into a garbage bin for food. They were not civilized people after all.

I had a talent for drawing and would have liked to be a cartoonist for a newspaper or magazine. I could draw good cartoons of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. I would have liked to make a career of it. When I applied to a magazine, I got some positive vibrations, but there was little chance for me. Germany was tightly organized. Everybody had his place and could not be moved away from it. It was like one gigantic piece of machinery and everybody was just a little cog. When I tried to change my job, I felt the hand of the government holding me by the collar. How much so, I was to find out one day.

Sometimes on a weekend I caught a train down to Lyck for a visit to my parents. In Königsberg I was living on rationed food, which was enough to keep me from starving, but my parents, living on a half acre block of land, grew their own food and if I wanted to eat turkey, home was the only place to get it.

That day my train had rolled half the distance to home, when it was halted in Rastenburg. Here some intimidating characters in shiny brown leather coats and stiff hats went along the train, checking everybody's identification papers. There were not many men on the train. The majority of the passengers were women, but the two men checked everyone. Until now I had heard only rumours about the Gestapo. This was the first time that I saw them. I was not concerned. I had my identification paper and beyond that a passport for admittance to the wharf.

I was by now a male in prime condition and cringed when they looked at me suspiciously. I already had heard rumours about the dreaded Gestapo, who were not at all like the friendly helmeted policemen who walked the streets to uphold the law. These Gestapo men popped up in the middle of the night and arrested people who were then never seen again.

They grilled me thoroughly and could not believe that such a fine specimen like me could still roam the country in civilian clothes. To them I looked more like a deserter who was travelling towards the Polish border with false papers.

"Where are you going?" Having found a young male, they both concentrated on me.

"Lyck, of course. It says so on my ticket." I was not concerned.

"That is at the border. You want to cross the border?"

"No, why should I? My parents live in Lyck."

"Why aren't you in the army?"

"Why aren't you?" I was beginning to get angry.

"Smart ass, eh? You could be a deserter or even a Jew. We have to check you out."

They dragged my struggling body from the train and let my train depart without me. At their headquarters they contacted the wharf by telephone and found my statements confirmed. To their regret they had to let me go without an apology and I had to wait for the next train, which arrived many hours later. It made me realise that in Germany there were forces that kept you in your place and it was better not to buck the system.

Apart from such nuisance intervals I was as free as one could be when one had to pay taxes to a government.

Once I became really adventurous. Having made it already all the way to Königsberg, I decided to see more of the world and make a weekend trip to Berlin, where all the action was. That fabulous town I knew only from history books and newsreels, which were played whenever I saw a movie.

I took a train across West Prussia, which was now Germany, and booked into a small hotel in Berlin. What was there to do? Aimlessly and lonely I walked along the Kurfürsten Damm and past the Funkturm. After looking at the zoo, I bumped into Hilfi, my best friend of my toddler and teenage days. He was still alive and also on a visit, dressed in an Air Force uniform.

"Hilfi!" I exclaimed, pleasantly surprised. I had not seen him for five years. He used to be a head shorter than I, but suddenly he was a head taller.

"My name is not Hilfi," he corrected me sternly. "My name is Fritz."

I chuckled, but understood. Hilfi had been short for Gotthilf, A name good enough for a kid given by a desperate mother in the agony of childbirth, but not for a fully fledged airman.

I spent a few hours with Hilfi, but he could not help me much. We both were small town boys and in spite of his six foot four, we were both lost in that big city. Things improved the following day when I found a real guide, who was a pretty local girl, perfectly willing to show me the sights.

When I bumped into her she was carrying a big picture under her arm, for she was an art student, coming down the steps from college. Her name was Lilly. She found a way to dispose of her picture and we walked,

taking in the sights. From the Brandenburger Tor along the Kurfursten Damm. We went to an art museum, where she explained to me the works of various artists, then we went through Sansouci, the Kaiser's summer palace, and hand in hand walked through the famous rose garden of Sansouci.

In the late afternoon I had seen enough of Berlin and we ended up at the Krumme Lanke, where we found a bench in a deserted area. The Krumme Lanke is a small lake with plenty of shaded trees for privacy. It was a favourite meeting place for lovers. Immediately we embraced and for hours we kissed passionately whilst time flew by like never before. At last we had to part and said our final goodbye.

"Arthur, you are a stupid idiot!" were Lilly's parting words before she left me.

I was stumped. I had thought we had a marvellous time together. Only later it dawned on me—at a time when males were an endangered species, Lilly had expected more from me than just passionate kisses. But that was the way I had been programmed in school. The teacher had told me nothing about sex, but plenty about knights in shining armour, chivalry and respect for women. A girl had to be a virgin when she married. He never mentioned that in those days, too, they needed to invent a chastity belt with a padlock to protect their women from contact with knights in shining armour.

Back at the wharf I settled down again. The war was far away and everything was going fine. Victory was within easy reach. Goebbels told us so over the radio.

My father's Volkswagen had been paid for long ago, but still it was not available. Those cars were already being built, but only with military bodies, to be used in Rommel's desert war where they proved to be superior to the enemy's Jeep, because our car did not need water for motor cooling. Anyhow, a car at home would have been useless. There was no petrol for civilian use and anyone who wanted to drive a car had to attach a wood burner to supply gas for the motor. It was a clumsy arrangement. A wood burner could not be attached to my father's motor bike, so that, too, remained safely stored in the shed and waited for the war to end.

So far everything around me was peaceful.

That was until one day I heard a strange hum in the air. Suddenly a loud, howling sound made me realise that there was danger in the air. I had heard that sound before on the newsreel, which we always saw when

we went to a movie. Normally that sound was friendly, made by our Stukas when they aimed bombs at the enemy. This here was no friendly sound. This time I was at the receiving end of those bombs.

In the grip of fear I threw myself on the ground and listened to four bombs hitting the ground and exploding. A Russian bomber had penetrated our air defence and dropped the bombs on Königsberg. How dare they! My fear subsided instantly and was replaced by rage. If I could have laid my hands on those pilots, I would have strangled them.

If the enemy thought he could demoralize the German people by bombing our cities, he was mistaken. Bombing cities does not demoralize anybody. It only creates hatred and calls for vengeance.

♦ ♦ ♦

1943. I am twenty-one years old. All grown up and a fully blown Nazi in the eyes of the world. I still am not organized in any branch of the party, but I do my job as a little cog in the war machinery.

I am still young and unaware of the corruption in the Nazi Party. As in every other nation, there are perks to gain if one joins the ruling class. If one joins the party, one can get better treatment. Plum jobs are available only for party members and one can even get additional food stamps. However, I still chose to remain free of any of the obligations one is committed to if one joins them.

The war is already in its fourth year and people are getting weary of it. The last war had lasted only four years and now, in this one, there still is no end in sight. What is worse, our army had stopped sweeping and had even been defeated in Russia at Stalingrad. A few hundred thousand German soldiers including General Paulus have become prisoners—to the Russians—unthinkable.

A temporary setback, of course. Goebbels on the radio triumphantly called it a *Siegreicher Rückzug* (a victorious retreat), a new word he had coined to describe all previous retreats. Whatever that controversial expression meant, it sounded comforting coming from his mouth.

Most people still believed in Hitler's infallibility. The academics, and even many military officers, had always looked at Hitler with mixed feelings. Of course, they could not help admiring his successes in restoring Germany's pride and dignity, but after all, they still saw in him the corporal who had the audacity to become the leader of Germany. The lowest lieutenant needed a matriculation from a gymnasium to gain his commission and here was Hitler with his public school education and daring to tell them what to do.

There was grumbling in the upper class, but when Hitler stood before the microphone the masses listened to his speech and were spell-bound, as if hypnotised. Few were unaffected by his charisma.

He was the Führer and still called himself the best strategist in the world, and with their troops retreating on all fronts, his generals had great difficulty swallowing that. Life was miserable on all fronts and now would have been the time to stop the war.

But there seemed to be no way off the treadmill—no way out of this. Rudolf Hess had flown to England to negotiate a peace deal, but he was not given a chance to state his case. He was thrown into a dungeon. The enemy refused to negotiate. Hitler himself, before the fall of France, had appealed to England to stop the war, but the English were adamant to destroy Germany completely. There seemed to be no other solution than to win the war. We never contemplated the possibility that we could lose the struggle which decided between life or death for our country.

After all, there was talk of secret weapons that were being developed. So far it was proven that, when it came to inventing armament, we were well ahead of our enemies. Our fighter plane, the Messerschmitt Me 109 still had to be matched by any other country. Still, it was disturbing that the enemy had the bomber numbers to break past our Me 109 defences and bomb our cities to smithereens.

For me there was a change when I was transferred from the wharf in Königsberg to a branch in Pillau on the Baltic coast, where the Twenty-First U-boat School Flotilla had their base. The work was quite different.

In Königsberg the wharf had been a workshop for the total overhaul of damaged ships. The U-boats had no crews and we worked on the carcass of the hull, which had the back ripped open to remove the diesels and gain access to restore the cables that had to be renewed.

Now, in Pillau, I made small repairs to boats that had veteran crews on board, and which really worked. These boats were alive and the smell of cooking wafted over the U-boat smell, which was a mixture of oil and sweat.

My private life, too, had changed. In Königsberg I had been secure, like in my mother's lap. If I could not pay the rent for a room in town, there always was a bunk at the wharf for me. Good food I always got at the canteen and had no worries about catering. In Pillau there was no bunk for me and there was no canteen. I was totally on my own and learned

to run my own household. That proved not to be an easy task, because the food supply was rationed to a bare minimum to keep a man alive and working. I was always grateful when a U-boat cook offered me a plate at lunch time.

The U-boats in Pillau were small type IIB boats. They were called *Einbaum* (that means a stone-age canoe made from a hollow tree). In spite of that derogatory name, some of them already had a good war record. One of my regulars was *U-7* who had trained sixteen commanders. Another one, *U-9* had once been commanded by Wolfgang Lüth, holder of the Knight's Cross, and had sunk eight ships. *U-61*, the old boat of Juergen Oesten, was there too. It had sunk five ships when he was captain on it.

The boats were small. Twenty-nine men formed the crew and squeezed into that small hull. After a bigger repair, there always was a test run where some men of the wharf were invited along as hostages. If the boat failed to come up after a dive manoeuvre, the wharfies risked their lives as well, so they had better made sure that they had done a good job, and were there to make emergency repairs.. I trusted them and always enjoyed the lunch which came along with it. Much later I learned that *U-7* failed to come up after such a test run and all twenty-nine men plus wharfies were lost.

One day a real front boat dropped in. It was *U-154* commanded by Oberleutnant Oskar Kusch. It had just changed commanders and had done some target practice in the Baltic Sea, when one machine telegraph dropped out. With Pillau the nearest harbour, it dropped in for a quick repair.

It was a IXc boat and I was impressed. Used to squeezing into an *Einbaum*, I found this boat to be a giant. It was twice as long and had double the crew.

"Wauw!" I exclaimed to the E-Maat as I opened up the faulty machine telegraph. "This is a giant of a boat."

"Not bad," he agreed, "but comfort for the crew still is not a priority. The stokers still have to share their bunks. One is on duty while the opposite watch sleeps."

From a speaker overhead sounded the enticing voice of Rosita Serrano, a singing star from Chile, who was a favourite with the armed forces. Suddenly she was interrupted as the wireless operator switched over to the news of the day. Dominant in the news was the voice of Fritsche, who

was a good disciple of Josef Goebbel. His sarcastic voice was mocking the enemy in spite of the retreat of our army on all fronts.

"Switch off that crap! I told you not to run that garbage!" a rough voice commanded, and immediately Rosita Serrano resumed to sing her song about *Roter Mohn*.

I looked through the hatch and saw that the rebuke had come from the commander himself. He was young, not much older than I, but the white cap, by an unwritten law only to be worn by the commander, gave him an air of superiority.

"Wauw!" I exclaimed again to the E-Maat, "that is strong tobacco!"

"Yes," the head electrician smiled. "Our captain doesn't like the authorities very much. You should have seen him when he came aboard. His first job was to clean up his cabin. He threw the Hitler picture which hung there into the trash can."

Well, I thought, that is a bit drastic and dangerous. These days it was dangerous to criticise the government. Everywhere on walls of houses were posters reminding us that *Feind hört mit* (Enemy listens in) but it was not only enemies who listened. Some people still believed so fanatically in Hitler that they would not hesitate to stab in their own brother if he criticised their beloved Führer, in spite of all the setbacks in the war. Even I was not disillusioned yet. One could not trust anyone. Could a U-boat captain get away with it?

The executive officer of the boat, Ulrich Abel, indeed later denounced his captain and Oscar Kusch was sentenced to death and shot in early 1944.

## Chapter Three

### Grown Up

By mid 1943 the war had moved closer to home, and to me it had become more than just a nuisance. In Russia our army was in full retreat and it seemed that it was the Russians who were doing all the sweeping. In Africa, too, Rommel had lost his foothold. He had retreated to Italy, where now the Americans were chasing him.

Hitler and his Minister for Propaganda still assured us that this was only a temporary setback and that soon there would be new weapons available to drive the enemy back to where they had come from.

Then, one day, Italy capitulated and still Hitler and Josef Goebbels calmed us down with optimistic speeches. They already had come up with destructive rockets, so we saw that those wonder weapons were no empty words.

For me life had become miserable, too. On the radio the retreat on all fronts could no longer be denied, and we heard that our cities were bombed by day and night. Above all, we did not have enough to eat. If I wanted to eat a nice piece of meat, I had to spend a whole month's ration on it. Quite often now, I went home to Mum on weekends to fill my stomach up.

And I knew that a war could be fun. I read it as a boy in the stories of Graf Luckner, who in the last war had sailed the Indian Ocean in his raider *Seeadler* and visited dreamy tropical islands.

The Navy! I would join the Navy!

I already had one foot in it, I would plunge fully into it and join up. I would have enough to eat, could shoot back when I was shot at and, above all, I would see the world.

In the past my job had been a privilege, because being here employed I could not be drafted to the Russian front and join my classmates who got killed there by the dozen. Now the situation had changed. Being home in Germany no longer gave you the security you wanted and being safe from enemy explosives. People got killed the same if they were at home or out fighting at the front.

Now I was a sitting duck when the enemy threw bombs on my head. If I was in the Navy, I could shoot back. Being at the front was no more dangerous than sitting here and facing the enemy's bombs.

I applied to the Navy and my draft papers came a few days later. My workmates thought that had been a foolish thing to do, and even the security officer of the base, a captain in Navy uniform, tried to talk me out of it and offered to withdraw my draft papers, but my mind was made up. He looked at me unbelievingly, as if I had lost my mind, but then gave up and let me go.

As a boy I had not been very ambitious. At the age of ten, when my father wanted to transfer me from the public school to the Gymnasium, I resisted, because I did not look forward to another eight years of schooling. I would have been quite happy to work as a farm hand in the country, and when I left school my father had his hands full to keep me finishing my apprenticeship as an electrician. Now I had learned that there was a difference between people and had already wanted to go to an engineering college, but the workers union was adamant to keep me in my place. I had to stay and do my work and could not change.

In the Navy that would be different. With my qualifications, I was sure to be promoted soon and become an NCO. In my job I had daily dealt with NCOs of U-boats.

So I packed a small suitcase and stepped onto a train. I was already on my way to see the world. My draft papers said that I had to report in a garrison in Ede. That was in Holland—the first time that I would be in a foreign country, where people speak another language.

I went a few days earlier to give myself enough elbow room. First I made a stopover in Berlin and booked into a hotel. I could not locate Lilly, with whom I had planned to correct my previous shortcomings, but

I found another redhead, with whom I retraced my previous steps with Lilly. I stayed only one night in Berlin, then I went to Arnhem, which was a town in Holland near the German border. It was a big adventure for a small town boy to find himself in a strange country where he could not understand the language.

I still had a couple of days to spare, so I went into a restaurant. They understood when I spoke German, but I noticed that here all was different. They had food to offer and I did not need any food stamps when I ordered a drumstick from a chicken.

Everyone in the restaurant spoke Dutch and I felt to be the odd one out. Nearby on another table sat two girls who had a marvellous time. They chatted loudly and were laughing their heads off, all the time looking at me. I could not understand what they were saying, but they must have been rude whilst making fun of me, because the owner of the restaurant came and evicted them.

I arrived in Ede one day early and booked into a hotel. The next morning I took my suitcase and marched to the garrison past the sentry at the main gate.

The NCO in charge was surprised to see me. They had sent a drill sergeant to the train to catch everybody who arrived that day. There the new men were bundled nicely into groups and marched in military order through the main gate of the garrison, as they had been prepared for in the Hitler Youth. Marching in step, and obeying military commands, was nothing new to any German youth.

All the drafted boys were eighteen years old or even younger. With my twenty-one I was the oldest in the room to which I was allocated, which already made me a leader.

The next step was that we disposed of our luggage and were issued infantry uniforms. Beyond that, we got one set of blues to indicate that we were heading for the Navy.

During the week we were dressed in infantry grey and learned to be soldiers. We started off by being assembled on the garrison ground and ceremoniously had to swear our allegiance to Hitler himself, before our education started.

In our classroom we were taught how to assemble the rifle 98 or use the hand grenade 08 or how the gas mask works. I was blessed with a good memory and had to hear a lesson only once and did not have to

study any more. Only at target shooting was I a failure. I got a lot of positive comments in my file, with the only negatives for my shooting.

The food was not as plentiful as I had seen on the U-boats in Pillau, but we were not hungry. Besides, we could supplement our meals by going to the garrison fence after the drill. There were Dutch women offering home baked cake for sale, which tasted nice.

On Saturdays we had shore leave. We donned our Navy uniforms and went, black ribbons fluttering from our caps in the wind, to the train station. I had already secured a girl who came every Saturday from Arnhem with her girlfriend to meet me. I picked another boy from my room and the four of us were regular couples.

The name of my girl was Corry and we always went into the heath for a sweet cuddle. Corry did not speak German and I did not speak Dutch, but we understood each other. The kisses were the same in any language.

Three months I spent in Boot Camp and saw little of the war. Once we assembled in the night and had to search the country to find some American pilots who had parachuted down from their wrecked plane. Another time we had a mock-up manoeuvre, during which I had to enter a Dutch house as observation post from an upstairs window. I felt embarrassed to walk on her spotless, polished floor with my rough, spiked army boots, but she knew better than to protest.

It all came to an end and one day I had to say goodbye to Corry. I disposed of my infantry uniform, donned my Navy blue and was a Matrose now.

There was no more solo travelling for me. We all were bundled up and sent to a holding camp in Germany, where I stayed for a couple of weeks. Then, one day in November 1943, most of us were sent to Neustadt, a little town on the Baltic Sea north of Kiel.

I arrived with mixed feelings. This was a U-boat school, where we would be turned into electricians, diesel specialists and mechanics. I would rather have been on a raider, sailing the Indian Ocean or the Pacific on romantic cruises, like once did Graf Luckner, but I could not buck the system. Besides, if I wanted to become an NCO, I had to stay with the *Ubootwaffe*, because that was what I was most qualified for.

I was in the electrician classroom and the teacher could not teach me anything I had not known before. It was an easy life for me. One day we were marched to a building that was a square, high tower. We climbed

up to the room on top of it. There was a round pool with warm, clear water, like a swimming pool. It was very deep, we could see the bottom far below. We stripped down to our swimming trunks and our instructor gave each of us a *Tauchretter*, which looked like a swim vest with a mouth-piece. With that we could breathe in oxygen, and by breathing out, the carbon dioxide was absorbed in a cartridge.

At first it was a strange feeling having to breathe in under water, but then one got used to it and trusted the equipment. A couple of boys fainted under water and had to be rescued. They had been too timid and breathed too shallow, breathing in their own carbon dioxide from the hose before it could pass through the absorption cartridge.

Afterwards we went down and into a waterproof room underneath that column of water. Here was the replica of the central control room of a U-boat. With all hatches closed the room was flooded. The water rose only to the bottom rim of a skirt, which dropped down from the hatch above. The air was now trapped in our room like in a drinking glass that is tipped upside down into the water.

The hatch above us was opened and we had a ten metre water column above us, but we could breathe like in a sunken U-boat lying on the bottom in ten metres of water. One by one, we activated our *Tauchretter* and swam to the surface, where we had been before.

There were other distractions. Sometimes we marched to the nearby harbour where we could inspect a real U-boat. We were Navy now. As in Boot Camp we sang while we marched, but we sang Navy songs now.

On a sailors grave, there are no roses.  
On a sailors grave, there are no flowers at all.  
The only mark, that is a lone white sea gull  
And hot tears, shed by a little girl back home.

We did not think about dying for our country. All our life, that had been part of the curriculum in our schools, and in the Hitler Youth. Dying for your country was an honour, and anyhow, we were singing about the other ones who were going to die. We intended to live until the war was won. Now, singing Navy songs we felt like veterans already.

In the harbour we climbed into the U-boat. Of course, to me that was nothing new. I was already used to it, but to the other boys the maze of valves, levers, pipes and gauges was bewildering. In the class-

room the pipes were only red and green lines, but here they were reality. The number of valves and switches to memorize could send your head spinning.

When the lectures ended three months later we were assembled in our classroom for the final inspection. Anxiously, we watched the examiner, with his entourage, entering the classroom. They were impressive, with a lot of gold on their sleeves, and they would judge not only the class, but also the teacher for his capabilities in transferring his knowledge to us.

The examiner swept all our faces with his eyebrows beetled, then he posed his first question: "When a electric motor is switched on, it draws a heavy current, and when it starts running, the current goes down. Why?"

Threatening, his eyes swept about the assembled would-be electricians. I sat in the last row and when his eyes fell on me, I tried to hide behind the boy sitting in front of me. The examiner would stand for no such nonsense. With his index finger crooked to go around the man in front of me, he pointed directly at me and thundered: "You!"

Reluctantly I stood up and rattled down the answer about the low copper resistance of the armature, which, when applied to Ohm's law would result in a high current and the opposite reacting current generated when the armature is turning and... and... and.

I was starting to explain to him the difference of friction and heat losses, how they affected the current, when he said: "Thank you gentlemen." He turned on his heel and the whole entourage left the room. The class had passed the examination. If he thought the work of the teacher was exceptionally good or realized that I had pulled his leg, I will never know. It did not matter. I was sure that this day would give me more positive comments in my file.

As in a book, my life was now divided into chapters. Each chapter three months long. Back home in Lyck, life could go on forever without changes. Now my life was divided into parts, each with a beginning and an end.

My time in Neustadt had come to an end. Finally our company assembled in the yard. There we stood, more than a hundred U-boat men, ready to climb on a boat and sail *gegen Eng-ge-land*.

Silently our company chief, a Leutnant, scanned our faces, young and eager. He knew what we did not know: It was the beginning of 1944.

The U-boat war in the Atlantic was lost. Most U-boats that went out did not return again, and those who came back arrived empty handed. Every patrol was a great risk and only the lucky ones came home again. He knew that he had just assembled a bunch of youngsters, all of whom he was sending to their certain death.

I looked at him. Was that a sob? His eyes seemed to be moist. He turned his back to us and silently he walked away without a last goodbye.

Again I was sent to a holding camp in Danzig, where I bunked on a ship. All men here were U-boat men. Most were new like me, others had already a number of patrols to their credit. Most of those brandished the U-boat medal on their chests, and some of them even the Iron Cross First Class.

One day, twenty of us were called to the commander of the base. He looked us over like a herd of prime cattle, then followed an examination until we were dismissed. We all were electricians. Two hours later ten of us went up again to be grilled even further and then dismissed. Two hours later three of us were called up.

I was wondering. The other two were veterans. One had the Iron Cross First Class, the other one even *Das Deutsches Kreuz in Gold*, the highest medal short of the Knight's Cross, on his chest. I was the third one and felt odd in this distinguished company. They wouldn't consider giving me the Knight's Cross already, I thought, amused. I hadn't seen any action yet.

In the end I was selected.

As it turned out, I was to be transferred to a boat whose commander had good connections. He had a new boat, which had just finished its final battle training of the crew in the Baltic Sea. Now it was ready for the front and it turned out that one electrician was unsuitable for the job. There was no time for further training, which had taken them more than six months, so they urgently needed an electrician who did not have to be trained for the job ahead. That man was me.

On departure I was given a big brown envelope to be handed over to the captain of my new boat. I suspected that in it was my personal file and would have liked to read it, but it had a big seal on it and was marked: DEKADOS, which means discrete commando item.

What puzzled me, was that the envelope was addressed to Kapitänleutnant Jebsen. I had known an Oberleutnant Jebsen when I worked for

the twenty-first school flotilla in Pillau. He had been a training officer there. Was that the same man?

The Boat was in Stettin. From the train station I took a tram to the harbour, like an experienced globetrotter. I walked the rest of the way from the nearest tram stop. With my sailor's bag shouldered, I already looked like a real sailor and chuckled as I looked down on me. All that was missing was that distinctive sailor's gait I had read about in novels, but could not imagine what it looked like.

Confidently I marched on the pier in the harbour towards the boat. *U-859*, as it was pointed out to me, was a beauty. A type IXD2 boat, nearly three hundred feet long. She was tied to the pier, slowly rolling in the waves of a passing trawler like the cradle of a baby. I liked the boat and shouldered my sailor's bag as I climbed in through the tower hatch down into the central control room. There, sitting at a table was Gunkel, the OOD, a mate from the diesel department.

I put the brown envelope on the table, dropped my sailor's bag, and reported for duty on board in a military manner, as I had learned in Boot Camp.

With his brows beetled he looked at me, then all the way down to my shoes and up again. My confidence crumbled under his icy stare.

"You unmilitaristic heap!" he thundered suddenly. "Get out, up to the pier."

Confused I stumbled up the ladder and down the gangway. What had I done wrong? Was it my sloppy salute, which I had practised to exhaustion before a mirror, or the jaunty dents in my cap, which I had artfully crafted into it? Surely they would not expect a green recruit to join them on the battle front?

Up on the pier he towered over me. "Drop down," he commanded. "Make twenty push-ups!"

Silently I obeyed and ground my teeth. This was worse than Boot Camp and I had always known the U-boat men to be a friendly, relaxed bunch of men. The newsreels, too, said so. They paid little heed to regulations, their uniforms and salutes were casual and lacked military precision. Now I had the misfortune to bump into a Boot Camp drill sergeant. This was a bad beginning. I hoped the whole boat was not like this.

After I had made my twenty push-ups, Gunkel let me go.

"Get in again!" he commanded, not quite as loud as before and I climbed through the tower hatch back down into the boat.

Gunkel followed me and nearly stepped on my head when I was not fast enough.

"Wait here," he said, when we were down in the central control room. He took the brown envelope and disappeared through the round hatch into the forward room where the captain's cabin was.

Gunkel seemed to be old for a Mate. He must have been pushing thirty, but he still swung through the narrow hatch like a monkey in a tree.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Gunkel came back. Some positive remarks must have been made about me, for Gunkel treated me with more respect. "Captain wants to see you," he grumbled.

I swung through the hatch like Gunkel before and went to the captain's cabin, which was a small enclosure, parted off by a grey-green felt curtain. The room was sparsely furnished. One bunk, a small table with three chairs and a hand basin was all there was. At the chairs sat three officers. Nobody wore uniforms on board, but on the shoulders of their working clothes all three had two stars, which indicated their rank to be Lieutenant Commanders.

"Baudzus," Jebsen looked at me. "I see you were in Pillau. Do I know you?"

"*Jawohl*, Herr Kaleu."

"I thought so," Jebsen looked at the man next to him. "He was a wharf at the twenty-first. He must know all about our boat."

"How long were you at the wharf?" the other one, probably the LI (leading engineer) asked.

"Four years, sir."

"You must know all about U-boats?"

"I worked only on U-boats, Herr Kaleu."

"How old are you?" the third one asked.

"I'm twenty-two, Herr Kaleu."

"I'm the doctor on board," he corrected me. "As a wharf you must have been *Unabkömmlich* and could have remained a civilian. How come you are in uniform?"

"Civilians get shot at too these days, Herr Stabsarzt. They get bombed. In uniform I can shoot back."

The three men laughed.

"Good reasoning, Baudzus," The captain approved. "You seem to be a clever boy. You have any more questions, Helmut?" He turned to the LI.

## Grown Up

"No," said the LI and looked at me. "Report to Obermaschinist Herring or the E Maat Hellwig. They will tuck you in. One of them will be in the E-machine room. I suppose you know your way around?"

*"Jawohl, Herr Kaleu."*

I turned on my heel and went towards the stern of the boat, which would be my habitat for the next six months... and then the coffin for most of the men on board.

## Chapter Four

### The Soldier

In the E-machine room I met both, the NCO Herling and the E-mate Hellwig. They were standing at a little desk, which had space only for a log book, where the charging time of the battery was recorded. Both looked at me as I entered the room through the steel door in the Diesel room bulkhead. It was the only civilized door on board. All others were round hatches, which needed an athlete's skill to negotiate.

With my sailor's bag shouldered I looked like a new arrival as both of them turned their head and looked at me. There were no icy stares as before from Gunkel. Their eyes expressed just interest, maybe curiosity.

I dropped my sailor's bag and stood erect as I reported myself on board.

"At ease, sailor," Herling said and both came down the few steps and looked me over like a new piece of equipment that had just been added to their machinery. Herling's voice was friendly, not military like Gunkel's. He must have been about thirty years old and have at least ten patrols to his credit, but then, nobody starts his job as an NCO. They all start off as a sailor, from the bottom up.

The E-mate, Hellwig, looked younger. Most probably he was even younger than I, but then, we had four years of war behind us. If I would have joined up in '39, I, too, would have been an NCO already.

"You are no youngster," Herling commented. "How many patrols have you done?"

"None Herr Obermashinist."

"What did you do all these years?"

"I repaired U-boats at the Schichau Wharf and at the Navy base in Pillau."

"Oh, I see." Herling touched a big lever on the switch board. "You know what that is?"

"Yes, that is the Ahead-Reverse lever, presently in Stop position."

"And this?" Herling touched a hand wheel further up.

"That is the field control for fine tuning the RPM."

"Very good, you'll do." Herling actually smiled. "You'll run the starboard switchboard on the port watch. Go into the back. There is your bunk and the boys will tell you the routine."

♦ ♦ ♦

The after torpedo room was crowded. Twenty heads turned and looked at me. They all were one close-knit family. They had been together for six months at the wharf, watching the building of the boat, followed by six months of training in the Baltic Sea, where they were welded into one unit as they drove the sleek machinery through the waves.

And now I came to join in, like a transplanted kidney, and it still had to be determined if I would be accepted or rejected. Luckily, they all were young. Apart from the Torpedo mate, Sievers, in the far corner, they all were younger than I and even the mate had only a couple of months on me.

When the boat is moving, there are only twelve men in the after torpedo room. All the others are on duty, but with the boat tied to the pier, all men were idling, sitting on the lower bunks. And talking about their exploits with girls ashore. It was called Navy topic number one.

The room was small. In the rear were two torpedo tubes, and on each side were six bunks, stacked two bunks high. There was no space for a table in the middle and at meal time the men sat on the lower bunk with their plate on their lap.

"Hallo," I greeted them, with my hand on my cap, after I swung through the narrow hatch and dropped my sailor's bag. In civilian life it had taken me a long time to replace the "Good Day" or "Good Evening" greeting with "Heil Hitler," but I had shed that now and the military salute came naturally to me.

I introduced myself and shook hands with everyone, trying to memo-

rize their names and faces. I had sixty-six faces and names to remember and that would be the hardest part of all.

The mates, being on their way to becoming an NCO, all slept forward, next to the NCO mess. All except the torpedo mates, that is. They had to be near their torpedoes at all times, and so we had a mate sleeping in our room. He was the only one older than I.

At first we sorted out my position in that crew. I ran the starboard switch board and my offsider on port was Reinhard Weich. At the Diesels on our watch were Rolf Bartzsch and Scholwin and the Central control room technicians were Lothar Jesse and Herbert Frank, nicknamed Paddy.

On the opposite watch in the E-room was Ernst Rydzewski, with whom I shared my bunk, and his offsider was Erich Wichmann. The sleeping arrangements were all tightly organized, with only the barest of comfort. Personal comfort was not a priority when running a U-boat. Now, tied to the pier in the harbour, nobody slept on board. We were allocated a barrack and everybody had a bunk ashore to sleep at night.

Ever since I left East Prussia, I'd had to get used to finding my way among a colourful assembly of men. All spoke a different dialect, and sometimes the language they called German was so distorted by colloquialisms that one had difficulty understanding.

Rydzewski and Wichmann could also speak Polish. Rydzewski came from Oberschlesien, a strip of land stolen by Poland after the last war and retrieved by Hitler afterwards. Wichmann came from Danzig, which also was claimed by the Poles until Hitler took it back. Both spoke a thick dialect and Wichman had some grammar troubles. He did not know the difference between *Ihn*\* and *Ihm*†, which earned him the nickname *Ihm* from mate Hellwig.

"You look young," I asked Paddy after the introductions. "Are you the Moses on board?"

"Young," he protested. "I'm not young. I'm twenty. The Moses is up front. He is Hans Vitt. He just turned sixteen."

"Sixteen!" I wondered. "He must have been fifteen when he went through Boot Camp."

"Yeah," agreed Paddy. "Straight from the Hitler Youth."

"How's the captain," I asked. "Is this a good boat? I would hate to die a hero on a boat like Prien's."

\*      Him

†      To Him

Picking a good commander was important to a U-boat man. There was a big difference between them. One could be commanded to join the crew headed by a young lieutenant, inexperienced but eager to gain his Knight's Cross, or even an experienced ace who had a reputation to live up to and was equally dangerous.

"He's okay, you can't get a better one," said Wichmann.

"I met him in Pillau, he was a training officer then."

"Yeah, but before he was the commander of *U-565*. That was a type VIIC boat. He sailed the North Atlantic. He's been in it since the beginning of the war."

"And still alive," I commented. "That is as good a recommendation as any."

"Yeah."

"Did he sink many ships? I didn't see the Knight's Cross on him."

"No, he's a careful man. You can depend on him. He sank a cruiser and some ships, but most of the time he was in the Mediterranean. There you have English warships like ants on an ant hill, and the water is so clear you can be seen by an enemy aircraft even if you're under water."

"Since he's still alive, he must be a trustworthy man." I was satisfied and started to pile my gear into the small locker, wedged between my bunk and the outer hull, which was allocated to me.

"What boats have you been on before?" Wichmann asked that dreaded question.

"None," I said. "I worked at the Twenty-first Flotilla repairing U-boats."

"I suppose you will come in handy when we get some damage from enemy fire."

"I suppose that was the general idea of sending me here."

I had the feeling that I was accepted in their midst.

During the days that followed the boat remained tied to the pier and in the evening I went out with the boys whilst I fused into the *U-859* family. I learned that we were part of a group of U-boats which were built together. The first keel was laid for *U-859*. Next to it came the keel of *U-860*, with Fregattenkapitän Büchel as commander. Then came *U-861* next, commanded by Kapitänleutnant Jürgen Oesten, a veteran who had already earned the Knight's Cross. Then there was *U-862*, commanded by Heinrich Timm, a veteran of Arctic Waters but, like Jebsen, with little

tonnage to his credit. We all were ready for the front except U-Timm, which was only halfway through her training in the Baltic Sea.

U-boat commanders were all different individuals. Their political trend ranged from men like Wolfgang Lüth, who was an open admirer of Adolf Hitler, to Oskar Kusch, who despised him. They all had one aim in common, to do their best in the struggle for the survival of Germany. For that they needed a good boat and a good crew.

All three parts of these were most important, but only when operating as a single unit. It was the most important task of the commander to use the time of the *Baubelehrung* at the wharf and the subsequent battle training time in the Baltic, to weld them all together.

Thereafter the designation number of the U-boat became negligible and it was, rather, known by the name of its commander. *U-859* became U-Jebsen, *U-861* U-Oesten, and *U-862* U-Timm.

U-Jebsen was ready like a foxhound straining on its leash, but still we idled.

At night time we all went out and met our sibling crews in the Trocadero, where we competed for the local girls. Ten months I was now in the Navy and my outlook on life was already totally corrupted. In every harbour or base I already had a girl and got used to it. When, during passionate kisses, the girl wraps her pelvis around your thigh, you forget all your teacher told you about chivalry and respect for women. Like Adam, you bite into the sweet apple that is offered to you.

And in between we sailed to many ports. We went to Kiel, to Hamburg and even once to Denmark, where we had some electronics checked and made some infra-red experiments. There in Sønderborg we were given some Danish currency and could go ashore.

With Rydzewski I went into a restaurant. We ordered roast Duck and topped it up with a buttercreme tart for desert. Never before had I seen such rich food, which even our superior U-boat cook could not match. This must be an oasis in the desert of the raging war.

Back in Stettin, our boat tied up next to a floating dock. That dock was mysteriously screened with a tarpaulin on both sides, so nobody could see what was inside. I could not control my curiosity and hopped over. Behind that sheltering canvass I saw a strange U-boat. It had no deck and looked rather like a fish with a big, single screw at the tail. The tower was the only feature that disturbed its streamlined shape. In my

imagination I could see that creature diving under water and outrunning a destroyer that was chasing it.

Hitler's wonder weapons were not all imaginary, I decided.

Our boat was ready to sail against England and we did not know what was keeping us in Stettin. All our other siblings were waiting, too. All we could do was speculate when we met evenings in the Trocadero.

One day our crew marched to the store room. There we were issued new uniforms. Everybody got one set of khaki and one set of brilliant white, but the trousers were all shorts.

Most mysterious.

That meant that we were heading for some tropical destination. We knew that ours was a long-range boat. We could sail to any place on the globe without refuelling, but having these uniforms also meant that we were heading for a distant harbour in the tropics. If we were just sailing for the Equator and coming back again, we would not need these uniforms.

The next day we had to pack all our belongings, including our Navy passports, into our canvas sailor bags, and it all was sent to Bordeaux, which was the base of the flotilla we would belong to.

## Part Two The Boats

### Chapter Five Germany 1944

By now many German cities were already partly demolished by Allied air raids, which continued day and night. During the day one could see the condensation stripes of the numerous bombers streaking across the blue of the sky, criss-crossed by the streaks of German Messerschmidts. Sometimes an enemy was hit and fell from the sky, giving satisfaction to the observers on the ground, but it had little impact on the bombing raids. There were too many of them. They came like a swarm of bees, of which one can kill a few, but one can not turn the swarm around.

In the Atlantic, too, the war had reached a stalemate. People were used to having their radio programmes interrupted to announce some hot news items about successes of the U-boats, who had held England in a stranglehold. Very few enemy ships had reached their destination in the first few years of the war. These triumphant news casts had dried up completely.

Worst of all, the Army had, in the past, dominated and boosted the optimistic spirit of the German population as it swept deeper and deeper into enemy territory. They had stopped sweeping and were retreating

on all fronts, reminding some Germans of the downfall of the ambitious Napoleon.

Of course, the radio broadcasts did not mention all this bad information, instead, Hitler and his Minister for Propaganda increased their promises, and assured the population of certain victory over the enemy.

Many still trusted the Führer, although news of casualties became more frequent. Sometimes it was a son, a cousin or a friend who was killed. There was always somebody who had to be written off from the circle of family and friends.

German U-boats had blockaded England, but now the roles were reversed. What German warships there were, had taken refuge in some harbour in the Baltic Sea, or some Norwegian Fjord. No supply ship could reach Germany any more and the war industry felt the pinch.

A year earlier some ships still managed to round Cape Horn at South America, coming from Japan with vital goods, but now the enemy had developed a dense air surveillance net and nothing moved across the Atlantic undetected.

German scientists were hard at work to make the country self sufficient. The only mineral Germany had was plenty of coal, so they found a way to make petrol from coal, and even rubber for tyres could be made from it.

Japan suffered from similar troubles. Their country was surrounded by American warships, who held the country in an iron strangle hold.

All goods in the world are not evenly distributed. One country has oil, the other one has tin, or mercury, or molybdenum, or quinine, opium and natural rubber. Countries have to trade these goods with each other. With all shipping blocked, this was no longer possible.

Admiral Dönitz, who in the meantime had been promoted to the head of the entire German Navy, had to find solutions. With the Atlantic at a stalemate and no successes being reported from this battlefield, he had to find a better area on the seven seas.

Already, in 1942, he had sent the group *Eisbär* into the waters off South Africa. It had been a big success. They had sunk thirty-four ships, with a total of 216,000 GRT. A follow-up, operation Drumbeat, sank in the same area twenty-six ships with 163,000 tons. That had been enough to please Goebbels for his radio broadcasts.

In 1943, Admiral Dönitz decided that he could kill two flies with one clap. He would send U-boats out as blockade breakers. The long range

type IXD2 could sail to any given point on the globe without refuelling. It could carry goods to Japan and come back loaded with vital goods to Germany. En route, it could sink ships to satisfy the Minister for Propaganda. All the fuel for the enemy's bombing raids had to go through the Indian Ocean and the tankers could be popped off there.

In order to implement this idea, he negotiated from the Japanese access to three harbours for his U-boat bases in the south east of Asia. These were Penang and Singapore in Malaya, and Batavia (Djakarta) in the Dutch East Indies. There were docks and wharf facilities where repairs could be carried out and the boats loaded with goods for Germany. They also could be supplied for the long trip back home.

In 1943 he made his first attempt to implement this new idea. It was not the great success he had hoped for. To reach the Indian Ocean, the boats first had to cross the Atlantic, which was a black hole that swallowed up many U-boats that dared to cross it. In that year he sent out twenty IXD2 boats, of which only seven broke through the Atlantic and reached the Indian Ocean. Thirteen of them went to the bottom and were lost, mostly with all hands. To make matters worse, all twenty boats had been commanded by experienced officers, some of them already decorated with the Knight's Cross.

Back home the mood was still optimistic. Of course, people were not told these statistics. Only victory news was fit for broadcasting. The newsreels pictured U-boats on patrol where gum chewing U-boat men counted explosions of depth charges and were joking about it.

Even at the U-boat school in Neustadt, whose boys now were younger and younger, and which still churned out a steady supply of U-boat men, nobody talked about losses. One rather heard stories of World War One, where Otto Weddigen popped off three English warships, one after the other, and then retreated laughing under water.

Just hiding under water would no longer save a U-boat.

The enemy had an effective secret weapon against U-boats, the two thousand girls in Bletchley Park. They listened in to all communications between the boats and their Headquarters. The position of the boats was immediately pinpointed by automatic direction finders and the cleverly scrambled message unscrambled with German Enigma machines, which had been found on captured U-boats.

This information was sent to the U-boat Tracking Room in London, where all U-boat traffic was recorded. The track of every U-boat was

marked with a purple line. Even the anticipated track was marked with a green line.

From a portrait hanging on the wall, a smiling Admiral Dönitz looked down on this activity, but the real Dönitz had no inkling that all his messages to his U-boats were being intercepted and processed here. He still insisted that his U-Boats transmit their daily positions to his headquarters.

Dönitz was not to be discouraged.

In 1944 he prepared a second wave of U-Boats bound for South East Asia. They were called the Monsoon Fleet. Of the ten boats that had left so far, four were already at the bottom of the Atlantic before the first of April.

The next to follow were U-Jebsen, U-Buechel, U-Oesten and U-Timm.

**Author's Note:** This book is not being written to glorify or excuse the war. It is being written to describe the German people living under the Nazi government. Since, during the war, I was a U-boat man, I describe the war from that viewpoint.

Countless books have been written about German U-boats and I want to stress the point that all people are different. For this purpose I chose to describe three sibling boats with the same destination, but all commanded by men with different dispositions.

We have Lieutenant Commander Johann Jebsen, commanding *U-859*, a typical career soldier who is indifferent to the Nazis and their government, but determined to do his duty to the best of his ability.

Then we have Commander Buechel of *U-860*, of a similar disposition, but less experienced. I have included his boat because it describes the fate a U-boat could expect in 1944 when crossing the Atlantic.

Finally there is *U-861*, commanded by Jürgen Oesten, a hero, already decorated with the Knight's Cross, but a dissident. Once enthusiastic about the Nazi government in its early stages, he became disillusioned and just pulled his weight until the end of the war.

## Chapter Six

### U-Jobsen

**J**had not yet been on a patrol and had not seen any action yet, but in all other respects I was a U-boat man. Sometimes, on short outings with the boat, I slept in my bunk on board and, when in a harbour, I went out ashore with the other boys, some of them already veterans.

My surroundings in the harbours of Kiel or Stettin, where we spent most of our preparation time, were familiar to me. I had lived the past four years in surroundings like that. Everywhere were giant cranes, like anglers dropping lines, but hooking big pieces of machinery instead of fish, whilst jackhammers chiselled off rivets on rusty hulls. Their noise filled the air like machine gun fire and in the evening all went black to hide all activity from the threatening enemy.

We are not the only boat to be tied to the pier. Sometimes a boat limps back from the front, the periscope and superstructure bent like a car that has smashed against a tree. Of these boats we see only glimpses and they are quickly towed out of sight, to be rebuilt in another corner.

No secret is a total secret, of course. There are always rumours to digest. Most of our information comes from the Trocadero, our watering hole ashore and dance hall where we meet our girls. There we bump into boys from other boats and hear what is going on in the world these days. One tries not to talk about politics, because it is not politically correct, unless one has some praise for the government. In the Trocadero I learned that the commander, Oscar Kusch, had been sentenced to death

for speaking out loud what he thought. I remembered him from Pillau and now he had been dobbed in by his own first officer and was then arrested. It was frightening to see that a commander could not speak his mind on his own boat.

Frightened, we looked over our shoulders. We, too, had some boys who came straight from the Hitler Youth. The younger they were, the deeper they were indoctrinated by Nazi teachings. It had not corrupted them or turned them into murderers—it had just strengthened their love for their leader.

Our spine was strengthened by pictures we saw in the newsreels, which could be deceptive. There, U-boats came home from a patrol with many pennants flying from their periscope, to be received with triumphant music from a military band.

In reality, more often than not they came back empty handed, having been unable to approach a convoy close enough to aim a torpedo. The protecting destroyers that surrounded the convoys had detection equipment that held the attacking U-boats at arm's length. These stories we heard from sailors on other boats, but they did not frighten us. We still trusted our captain.

Our destination, too, was no secret any more. Of course, we had not been told where we were heading, because it was top secret, but a wireless operator from U-Oesten, who had tuned in to Atlantis, an enemy station from the BBC, had been told by them that we all were heading for Penang. We found an Atlas and looked up Penang. We were delighted. It was a little island with waving palm trees and Hula Hula girls. That was something to look forward to.

Of course, capital punishment was the penalty for listening to enemy broadcasts and one had to whisper when discussing such secret things. *"Der Feind hört mit"* (The enemy listens in) it screamed from posters on all walls, but as the Kush affair had proven, it was not only the enemy one had to fear.

I was sitting with Rydzewski in the Trocadero when Willy from U-Büchel joined us. He was a wireless operator there.

"Can you receive the BBC with your radio set?" Rydzewsky asked.

Receiving the BBC was not easy. Most German radios had no short wave reception and could receive only the local stations on the middle wave.

"Of course I could if I wanted to. Besides, since I don't use a speaker,

but headphones, nobody knows what I'm listening at, but why should I? It's all lies what they're saying."

"Oh?"

"Sure is," Willy confirmed. I once was on a boat commanded by Wolfgang Lüth. Now there was a commander—Knight's Cross and all. He assembled us regularly and drummed into us what Hitler had achieved for us. The English should be joining us and not throwing a stick into the spokes of our wheel."

"If he was that good, why did you leave?"

"We all left. The boat needed an overhaul and Lüth became commander of the Navy School in Muerwick. He was a true commander, and he wasn't even a German."

"Oh? What was he then?"

"He was a *Ausland Deutscher*, born to German parents who lived for generations in Latvia."

"And that does not make him a German?" Rydzewski bored.

"Well..."

"How did you settle on U-Büchel?" I changed the subject.

With the crew coming from all corners of Germany, one can easily put one's foot in one's mouth. Rydzewski was an *Ausland Deutscher*, too. He was born in Poland, of German parents, and normally nobody stumbled over that.

"Well, so so," Willy grumbled. He's a Fregattenkapitän, but he's no Lüth. He has little front experience."

\* \* \*

**T**he first of April, 1944. April Fools Day. Nobody fooled around on U-Jebsen. At last something seems to be happening. The boat had been back in the dock, where the keel was opened and loaded with trading goods, such as heavy steel bottles filled with mercury. Also lead and heavy chunks of optical glass were packed into the keel.

Back at the pier, truckloads of goods arrived to be stowed on board in every nook and cranny. All goods that disappeared under the steel floorboards were catalogued and registered by the Smut, who was responsible for the food supply on this long trip.

We all were glad that we were leaving because it was no fun to live in Germany. Kiel was already suffering from enemy bombing raids and even during the day the air raid sirens howled and one could see countless condensation streaks of the enemy bombers white against the blue of

the sky. These were criss-crossed by streaks of our fighter planes, but they were up against too many enemies. It was like battling a swarm of bees.

Even tied up to the pier the boat was vulnerable. English Mosquito bombers dared to approach, flying under the radar screen low over the water, arriving without warning. They dropped their bombs and disappeared again.

So far the siblings, U-Jebsen, U-Büchel, U-Oesten and U-Timm, had survived those attacks. U-Jebsen was the veteran among the siblings. It already had caught a bomb whilst still laying high and dry on the wharf. Now the damage had been repaired and it was the first to leave.

It was the fourth of April 1944 when we cast off. Was that a bad omen? Luckily the time was not four forty four, otherwise 4.4.4.4.4 would have sounded very bad.

There was no military band blowing march music, no grieving relatives, no flower girls to see us off. Out of Kiel we sneaked in all secrecy. Only our foghorn blew once long, once short to tell the world that we were leaving.

The weather was grey and miserable as Jebsen, with his white commander's cap, sat high up on the bridge and manipulated the boat through the murky harbour water away from the pier. Rydzewski was down at the switchboard, skilfully operating the E-machines that were used for harbour manoeuvring in preference to the clumsy diesel engines.

The LI and the Doctor, too, were on the bridge to have a last look at the Fatherland. On patrol the LI was never on the bridge. Only men with a job on deck were permitted here. The Doctor, mostly unemployed with a young, healthy crew like ours, had sneaked himself a job which permitted him to come up sometimes. When he felt like it, he relieved the radar warning operator on the bridge. This man held an antenna, connected by a cable through the hatch to the Naxos receiver, and he stood and twisted the antennae in all direction, searching the air for centimetre radar pulses, which a possible enemy might transmit. He was supposed to detect radar pulses before the enemy had received the echo and translated them.

On the after deck many of the off duty crew were lined up to see the familiar shores disappear. All of the men looked forward to this patrol. Nobody ever told them that these days seven out of ten boats on patrol ended up at the bottom of the sea. In 1943 twenty boats had headed for

the same destination as U-Jebsen. Thirteen had ended up at the bottom of the Mid Atlantic.

We all were volunteers when we joined the Navy. Most of us came straight from the U-boat school in Neustadt, but all had been connected to this boat for the past year and were part of it. Now the off duty crew, including me, were lined up on deck. Standing next to me was Lothar Jesse, about the same age as I. He had been attending Gymnasium, but before he matriculated and could have been an officer, he broke off his studies to fight for his Fatherland. On my other side I was flanked by Heinz Ruprecht. He was still very young. He, like most of the men, probably had his entire education during Hitler's government and joined the Navy straight from the ranks of the Hitler Youth.

By now the boat had passed the outer harbour entrance and the sharp bow cut through the waves and whipped up icy spray. Shivering, I looked back on the foaming, white wake beyond which the Fatherland disappeared in a hazy mist.

I listening to the hollow, dependable rumble of the diesel exhaust pipes and imagined the warmth they radiated.

"I'm freezing cold, let's go," I said to Jesse, and we climbed up to the tower and then down into the central control room. This was Lothar Jesse's domain. There was a maze of hydraulic valves and controls, used for trimming or diving the boat, which only a few men on board could operate with confidence. We swung through the round hatch into the diesel room, which already was a cosy warm. Mate Gunkel sat on an oil drum, keeping a watchful eye on his two diesel stokers, who each stood at the head of a diesel, ready to shut them off, should the diving alarm be given.

Through the narrow aisle between the two huge machines we balanced into the E-room, where Rydzewski and Wichmann stood, adjusting the rate of charge for the batteries with the field control on their switchboards.

Jebsen remained up on the bridge. He was not part of the duty routine, but had to be available twenty-four hours a day. Now the OOD was Oberleutnant Schnitzler. After the Doctor, he was the oldest man on board. Before the war he had been a captain on a merchant ship, but now there were no more German ships to sail and so he had joined the Navy.

Only the captain, the OOD, the Naxos operator and the lookouts

were ever allowed to be on the bridge. At all times the boat had to be ready to crash dive, which could be executed in thirty seconds. This diving procedure, drilled to exhaustion in the Baltic Sea, permitted no idling persons on deck.

Being still in familiar waters, the LI and the Doctor remained on the bridge to wave the Fatherland Goodbye. The three officers were friends. All three were recently married and had left their wives behind.

"I wonder who has the better deal," Jebsen pondered, looking back on the white wake of the boat that still tied him to his country. "We're heading to the dangers of the war, but our women, too, have to face bombs from England and America by day and night."

"Yes," the LI agreed. "At least we can shoot back when we're attacked. At home they have to cope it without being able to defend themselves."

"Maybe we should have taken them along," the Doctor proposed. "Then we could protect them."

"Good idea," Jebsen laughed. "Why didn't you come up with it when we were still in the wharf. We could have built some additional cabins into the hull."

"Maybe we can turn back and fix that."

"Too late now," Jebsen bantered. "What do you think, Schnitzler," he addressed the OOD. "Would you have needed a cabin, too?"

"I would have liked it," Schnitzler joined the banter, "but I don't think our BdU, Admiral Dönitz, would have approved of it. Even at the HAPAG\* they didn't let us take our women with us."

Everyone fell silent after that. It was nice to ban deep brooding about the war.

At these times, analytic thoughts were pushed into the background by light-hearted banter. Everyone with access to information knew that the war was lost, that the struggle to save the country could not last much longer. But political correctness was stubborn. It dictated that the war had to be won by Germany at all cost.

Was that possible?

But what else was there to do?

The enemy refused to negotiate and was determined to destroy Germany completely. The Treaty of Versailles had given them a taste of it. This time it would be worse, or so Goebbels told the people. So Hitler insisted that they had to win the war.

\* HAPAG: Hamburg-Amerika Line.

"Well, gentlemen, I think I'll turn in and have a snooze." Jebsen jumped from his elevated seat down to the grating. He had to be available at all times and might as well use the peaceful time in the Baltic for some relaxation. Later, in the North Sea, he would have to cope for some days without shutting an eye.

"*Abwärts!*" he called down the hatch, to warn others that he was coming down, and slid down the two ladders into the central control room. Quickly he stepped aside as the LI and the Doctor called *Abwärts*, too, and came climbing down the ladder, but at a slower pace. Sliding down was only for the experienced bridge crew, who emptied the bridge with the agility of monkeys. The LI and the Doctor were too old and physically unfit for it.

Whilst the LI and the Doctor disappeared through the round hatch forward into the Officer's Mess, Jebsen lingered behind and looked around. He had little interest in the function of the many controls and looked only at the *Rudergänger*, who sat to the right of the forward hatch and had the gyro monitor between his knees as he steered the boat. There was a big manual steering wheel, but at the moment he steered the boat with two buttons, on which he laid the palms of his hands. Above each of his hands were the controls of a machine telegraph, which dictated the required speed to the engine operators.

Jebsen cast a look at the gyro repeater to check the course of the boat and then turned to Obersteuermann Gutbrod, who sat at the bulkhead at a table on the other side of the hatch. He also was the third OOD of the watch.

"How's it going, Gutbrod?" Jebsen laid a hand on Gutbrod's shoulder and looked down on the chart, on which the anticipated track of the boat was indicated. It went past the Denmark islands towards Norway.

"Very good, Herr Kaleu," Gutbrod answered, remaining seated. "It will be a while until we have to check our position. To find our way through all those islands we can navigate with our radar, the *Hohentwiel*."

"Very good, Gutbrod, carry on."

Jebsen turned and went through the hatch into the Officer's Mess. He was twenty eight and not quite in shape like the youngsters of his crew. Lack of exercise had taken its toll and whilst he still could slide down the ladder, he had given up on swinging monkey-like through the hatch like the young ones.

\* Helmsman.

On the port side, opposite his own compartment, were the wireless rooms with the *Hohentwiel* Radar, The GHG listening device, the wireless and the Enigma scrambling devices. Oberfunkmeister Silberhorn sat there, his ears covered with his earphones, his eyes turned inward, and did not notice the captain passing by.

In the officer's mess the LI had set up the table in the aisle and had already found Skat partners in the second OOD, Leutnant Lask, and the Doctor for his favourite card game. Jebsen squeezed past them and had a look into the galley, which was not much bigger than a large cupboard. It would have been the nightmare of any housewife, yet, the Smut had to cater for sixty-seven men.

"How's it going, Smut?" Jebsen asked. "What are we going to have today?"

"Very good, Herr Kaleu, we're having T-bone steak. Might as well live it up while we still have supplies of fresh meat."

"That's the spirit. Smells good."

"Jawohl, Herr Kaleu."

Jebsen turned and went back again, where he had to squeeze past the LI again. He seemed to have a few Aces, which he thundered with his fist on the wonky convertible table.

Jebsen, too, liked to play Skat, but now he felt tired. The last few days of preparation had left him no time to relax and soon there would be more strenuous days, when he had to sneak past the enemy's blockade.

He might as well enjoy a few days of calm before the storm. He pushed the curtain to his compartment aside, cast off his shoes and dropped down on his bunk.

♦ ♦ ♦

**J**he crew still had to settle into their new routine. Everything was different now. In the past they had been out to sea, but they always had the backing of the harbour with a bunk for everyone. Rarely had they been out at night. They had lived like any creature in the world, adjusting their life to the cycle of day and night.

Now they lived locked up in the hull, isolated from the day and night cycle. Like predators in deepest Africa, when the sun got down, the boat became active, its senses on full alert to sneak past a waiting enemy and snatch some time to charge the depleted battery. At sunrise all activity died down.

Independent of the daylight cycle, the crew lived a different Life.

Their cycle was divided into four hour pieces: Four hours duty and four hours sleep.

After four hours duty, they still had to learn to quickly fall asleep, and that often with the thunder of eight thousand horsepower drumming on their ears from only twenty metres down the passageway. One had to learn to switch off one's ears and block out all noises.

After a short stopover in Norway's port of Kristiansand, where fuel and fresh food was topped up, the long voyage to the other side of the globe began.

The first part was planned to lead them through the Rose Garden, a narrow, shallow stretch of water between Iceland and the Shetland Islands. It rather looked like a suitable place for an ambush in a Wild West Indian movie. Many U-boats had dared to take this route and had not lived long enough to regret it.

Jebsen dared to take this shorter route. His reason was that his boat was one of the first to be equipped with a snorkel. This was a chimney-like device which permitted the boat to travel under water with Diesel power, the big machines sucking air from the inside of the boat and replenishing it through the snorkel from the outside.

When Jebsen arrived at that dangerous area, he did not use the snorkel after all. It was April and the days were getting longer. Even the wake of the snorkel could be seen by passing aeroplanes. The noise of the diesels, too, interfered with his GHG and prevented him from listening for threatening dangers.

And so he proceeded mainly submerged along the bottom, surfacing only shortly at night to charge the batteries. Everywhere around them bombs exploded, dropped by the enemy at random hoping for a lucky hit.

Life on board was miserable. With the diesels mostly idling, the boat could not be heated. The short periods of surfaced travel were just enough to keep the rear of the boat reasonably warm. Up in front it was cold. Condensation water was running from every steel part, dripped into the bunks and kept the blue-chequered bedding damp.

They had passed the last winter in the Baltic Sea, but after the end of the day they always had the harbour waiting for them to melt their frozen limbs. They all hoped to negotiate the hostile northern waters soon. After all, they were heading for the tropics and soon it must be warm again. To be a seaman in this region was worst of all. At night they had to

go up to the bridge, exposed to the icy April wind, which froze icicles to the tips of their noses, and then they had to sleep in a cold bunk.

In spite of choosing this dangerous route, Jebsen was a careful man. He restricted his radiowork to listening only and never reported his position, as required by his headquarters. Bletchley Park had lost him and was speculating wildly to guess where he might be. They did not find him.

• • •

The twentieth of April. It is Hitler's birthday. In Germany it is a public holiday, but on the Monsoon Boats hardly anyone takes notice of this day. Many men were already disillusioned by Hitler, who had nothing more to offer, but they had to carry on. There was no alternative.

Jebsen orders a good meal from the Smut. He has reason to celebrate, but it is not Hitler's birthday. On the twenty-first is his own birthday, and he had passed the *Rosengarten* unmolested. Already the boat is on a southwesterly course and heading for warmer waters.

However, life on board is still miserable and no delicious food can change that. At the speed we are travelling, it will still be a week until we are in warmer waters, so Jebsen orders rigging the snorkel. We had not yet tried this new device.

The diesel engines were started and soon the cosy temperature of the engines warmed the rear of the boat and from there eventually reached the front, where the seamen rested, glad that they did not have to go up on the bridge.

But not everything is perfect.

When snorkelling, the diesels suck their air out of the boat, whilst the air in the boat is refilled from the outside through the snorkel. Every time the head of the snorkel is submerged in the long Atlantic swells, a valve closes the intake and the big diesel engines suck a vacuum in the boat, also sucking out the eardrums and eyes of the crew. As soon as the snorkel pokes its head out of the water, air at outside pressure fills the boat again, suddenly, like an implosion. Eardrums pop in and out, which is painful for the crew.

My duty, when not running the E-machines, was to operate the fresh-water distiller, which produced fresh water for the galley and the ever thirsty battery. This machine is very touchy and has to be operated close to the boiling point of water. As everybody knows, water boils at a hundred degree Celsius, which is not quite true. The boiling point also depends

on the ambient air pressure and with that fluctuating wildly, the machine could not be operated. Since it also could not be operated when running submerged powered by the E-machines because it was heavy on electricity consumption, we ran dangerously low on water.

Fortunately, north of the Gulf of Biscaya we ran into a storm. Rain and dark clouds shielded us like a curtain from our enemies and we surfaced even during daylight. The towering waves had made snorkelling impossible. The long-suffering lookouts had to man the bridge again, but had to tie themselves to the railing to prevent being washed overboard by the wild seas. The Naxos operator remained below, because with his antennae cable feeding through the tower hatch, that hatch could not be closed. Because of the big waves washing over the bridge, the hatch had to be kept shut.

Single-mindedly, U-Jebsen proceeded through the storm, feeling safe because no aircraft could find them between the towering waves. Jebsen still did not communicate, and only listened to what others had to say. He learned that U-Büchel and U-Oesten were already on their way. They had taken the longer way through the Denmark Strait, close to the polar ice, and Jebsen shivered when he thought of it.

Another boat, *U-198* under Oberleutnant Heusinger von Waldegg, had left France with destination Penang and must be somewhere on his beam. Adding the type VIIc wolf packs operating here, the Atlantic was now crowded.

Jebsen was glad that so many boats were on their way. The more boats there were for the enemy to concentrate on, the better his own chance to slip through. Gladly, he put up with the wild weather as he made more mileage every day. Every centimetre gained on Gutbrod's chart brought him closer to his destination.

♦ ♦ ♦

A week had passed since Hitler's birthday. Jebsen was well south and the storm had completely disappeared. The grey of the waves had turned to a brilliant blue like the sky above. The sea looked innocent, as if it were unable to generate a storm with angry smashing waves.

Jebsen saw this beauty only through his periscope.

Up there in that beautiful sky the enemy was lurking, just waiting to send him to the bottom of the sea, where the water was not brilliant blue, but black and hostile. A few times he had tried to surface at night to charge his batteries. Each time it had taken the enemy only minutes

to find him with their radar, which the Naxos operator detected and sent them down again.

Jebsen was back to snorkeling again. With the sea reasonably calm, it was easier on the crew and now the snorkel operated as intended by its designer.

Still, freshwater was in short supply. It could only be used for consumption or for the battery, which steadily evaporated water. Nobody could shave and all grew beards, which already ranged from a dense black bush on the NCO Herling's chin, to a hardly visible blond fluff on the chin of Paddy. Not to mention Hans Vitt, who was frustrated because he sprouted not a single hair on his smooth face.

Hygienic conditions on board would have been a woman's nightmare. Two men took turns at sleeping in each bunk, and the damp bedding of the bunks was never aired. All that had to wait until we had reached the equator, where the heat would dry the accumulated sweat. There were no pyjamas. When it was cold, one kicked off his shoes and went fully clothed under the blankets. Sleeping at the equator one dropped all clothing except his underpants. Since there was no privacy on board, one risked indecent exposure when dreaming about good times ashore.

The cold, icy water, too, kept washing to a minimum. Only in the warmer regions of the globe could one indulge in a good soaking. Some people have to clean their teeth after every meal. Imagine that on a U-boat. A dentist had inspected our teeth before the patrol and pulled out everything suspicious. What was left had to last for the next year or two.

Worst of all, manipulation of the toilet had become an art. The sewage had to be pumped out through a complicated valve system. With pressure from the outside, those valves sometimes malfunctioned and the sea threw the sewage back at the polluter with an explosive noise which could be heard by the enemy for miles around.

Jebsen was always nervous when somebody was on the toilet and nobody was permitted near it when an enemy was near. The crew had to train their bodies to wait with the necessary discharge of the bowels until the boat was surfaced.

♦ ♦ ♦

**T**he OOD was Lieutenant Lask, who sat in the periscope saddle, turning it idly with the controls at his feet like a slow-moving carousel.

For hours now he had seen nothing but the empty expanse of water that sheltered an invisible enemy.

Oberfunkmeister Silberhorn was watching, too. The batteries were charged and they had alternated to propel the boat with the E-machines, so there was little noise in the boat and he could listen with his GHG. He was the first to call out, "Ship on starboard ahead, reciprocating engines." He had detected a ship, which the periscope had failed to see.

As if electrified, Jebsen jumped up from his bunk, climbed up the ladder and took the seat at the periscope, which Lask quickly vacated.

Schnitzler, too, was already at the second periscope with Gutbrod at his side. The Obersteuermann held a thick volume of *Gröner Books*, which displayed the silhouettes of all ships that sailed the seven seas.

Both periscopes now focused on a single ship that came up to meet them. It was a fast moving freighter, sailing alone. Either it had missed a convoy, or was confident that the U-boat war was won for the Allies and the wolves had crawled back into the holes where they had come from.

Jebsen preferred to work with the UZO and attack when surfaced. These were special binoculars, attached to the bridge of the boat, which transmitted all aiming data straight down to the torpedo he intended to shoot. If he decided to attack this boat he had to remain submerged, lest an enemy plane dived down on him whilst he was gloating at his victim.

Jebsen looked at the approaching ship with mixed feelings. Should he attack it or let it go? His orders said that his first priority was to reach his destination, Penang. Only in second place was he to sink ships, if that did not endanger his mission.

What was there to do?

If he attacked, his presence in these waters would be revealed to the enemy and he would be hunted like a rabbit by a pack of wolves. On the positive side, it was late afternoon and he was sailing into the night. That would postpone the hunt for him by at least twenty hours. Furthermore, he needed a bit more sunken tonnage to earn his Knight's Cross. He was long overdue for that. Too much time had been lost whilst being a teacher at the commanders school in Pillau and he intended to use this trip to catch up with his luckier colleagues.

On the other hand, if he did not attack the ship, he played it safe. Nobody knew where he was. Even the BdU was still speculating if he was still sailing or already resting at the bottom of the Atlantic.

"Ship is the Panamanian freighter *Colin*," came the voice from Schnitzler. "6,255 tons."

His trained merchant skipper eyes had no trouble identifying the ship from its silhouette.

Jebsen was pleased. 6,255 tons closer to the hundred thousand he needed to get his Knight's Cross. The risk he took seemed to be negligible.

"Load tubes one, two and three," he commanded. It did not hurt to be prepared. He still could change his mind if he wanted to, but reversing his decision would be difficult. The crew was now in an attacking mood and could accuse him of cowardice if he retreated. His position was difficult. On one hand the crew demanded from him that he bring them home safely and, on the other hand, they expected that he shed glory upon them.

Pondering, in the meantime he continued his attack procedure. Gutbrod had disposed of his book and now read off numbers from the scale on the periscope as Jebsen called out the marcation points. Schnitzler, being in the tower and having nothing else to do, manned the computer and cranked the numbers in as called out by Gutbrod.

Busy with the familiar attack procedure, Jebsen did not waver any more as the ship came closer, heading into the crosshairs in his periscope like a fly heading for a spider's web.

"Fire one—fire two!" came the command from Jebsen when the ship crossed the hair-line in his periscope.

Throughout the boat the crew did not dare to breathe. They all had felt the bump when the two torpedoes left the tubes. The change from the weight lost up front was quickly rectified by some trimming done by the LI, pumping water into the forward ballast tanks. Anxiously everybody listened and waited, in their mind following the path of the torpedoes. For most of them it was their first experience, which so far they had seen only in newsreels.

*Bumm!*

Bull's eye! Everybody heard the explosion in the distance and cheered. Nobody considered that people could be killed that way. It was like target shooting at a carnival. We were glad that we had hit the target.

U-boat men don't shoot people, they shoot ships. In our mind we knew that it takes time for a ship to sink. There is enough time for the

crew to go into their life boats and sail to the nearest coast line. If they are lucky, they find a little island with waving palm trees and hula hula girls. Many novels, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, picture it like that.

No bad conscience here.

Whilst Jebsen still observed the sinking of the *Colin*, the forward torpedo room was converted into a workshop. Block and tackle on slide rails were rigged, stored torpedoes lifted and loaded into the empty tubes.

Up in the tower Jebsen cast a last look at the debris that still floated where once a ship had been. He saw some life boats with survivors rowing away before the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

“Surface!” He commanded.

Sooner or later this area would become dangerous, he thought, and he might as well leave with full power as quick as possible. Leaving a fluorescent wake behind, U-Jebsen headed into the darkening night, the wireless telling the BdU and Bletchley Park what he just had done.



(Top) Author's family, author on right.

(Bottom) At the U-boat Memorial at Moltenort, with the *U-859* memorial plaque. Author (l) and fellow *U-859* survivor Lothar Jesse.



Wartime photograph of author, taken while he was attending U-boat school.



Kapitänleutnant Johann Jebsen in winter dress uniform. The Iron Cross First Class medal is worn on the reefer jacket.

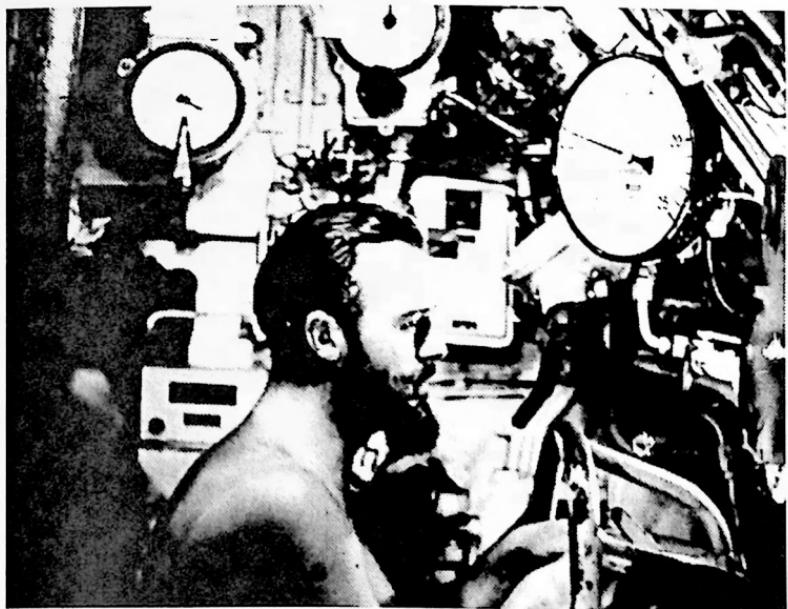
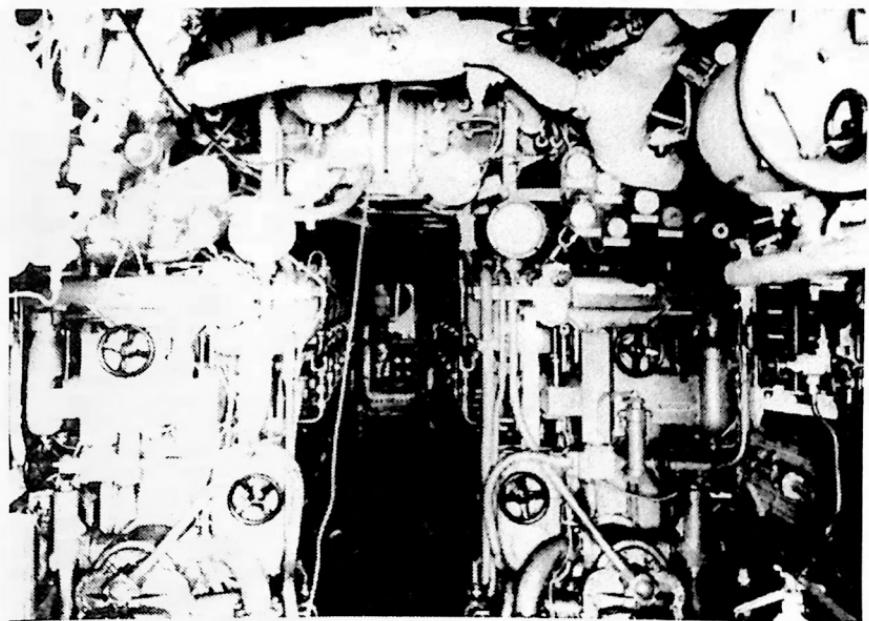
Jebsen in a shipboard photo. The combination of a civilian shirt and uniform jacket was fairly common in the U-boat service, where shipboard dress standards were far more relaxed than in the surface fleet.



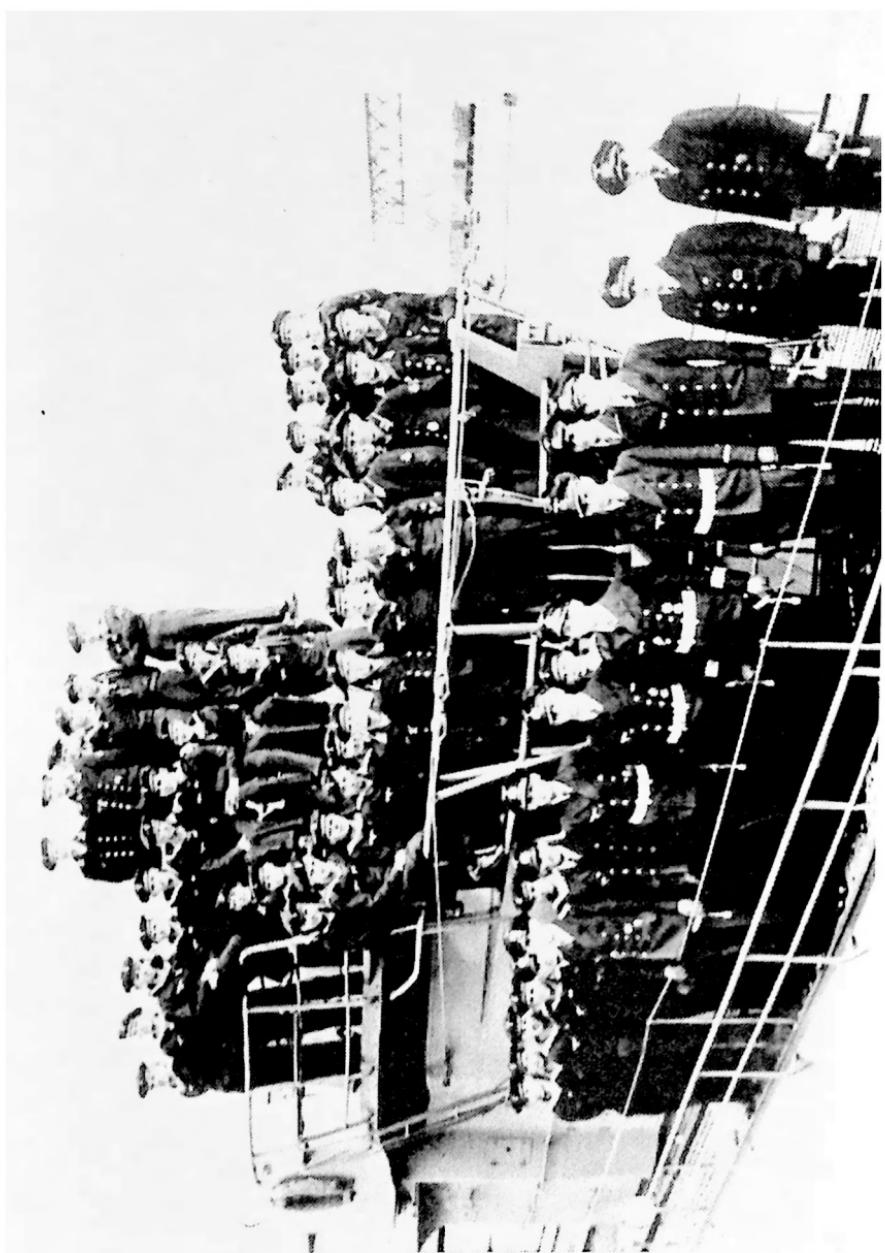


(Top) Korvettenkapitän Jürgen Oesten commanded *U-861*, the only one of this group to return successfully to Germany from the Far East.

(Bottom) *U-862* (U-Timm) at sea. *U-862* made it to Penang, and was taken over by the Japanese as *I-502* after Germany surrendered.



U-873 was not a Monsoon U-boat, but was a typical Typ IXD2 long-range boat. (Top) Engine room. (Bottom) Control room, showing one of the diving plane operators.



Group photograph of the U-859 and crew, taken prior to departure on her voyage to the Far East.



Korvettenkapitän Paul Büchel of the *U-860*. Büchel and 19 others survived, but 42 members of his crew were lost when *U-860* was sunk by aircraft from the U.S.S. *Solomons* on 15 June 1944.

Seiel, den 2. April 1944.

129

U-859  
S. M. b. a.

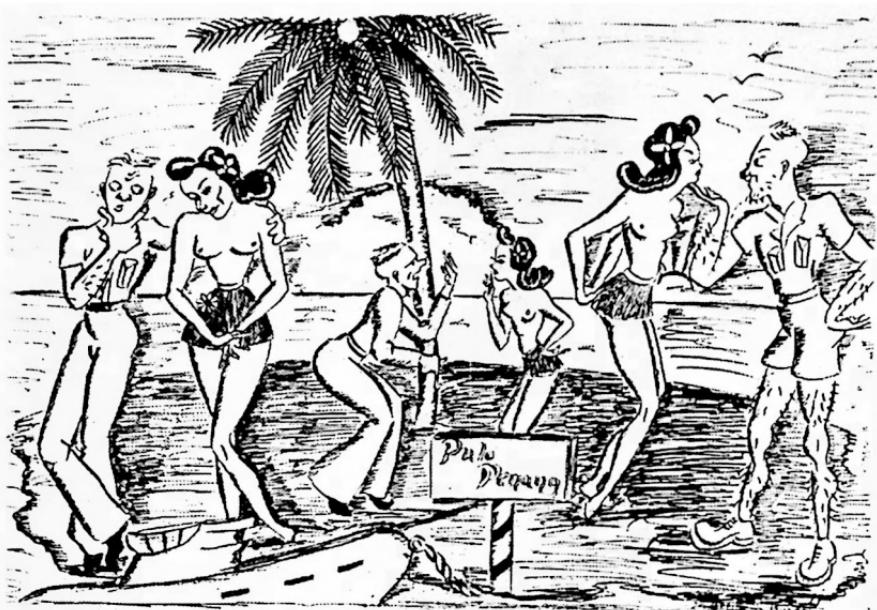


Dank für  
Betreuung und  
Ausfützung.

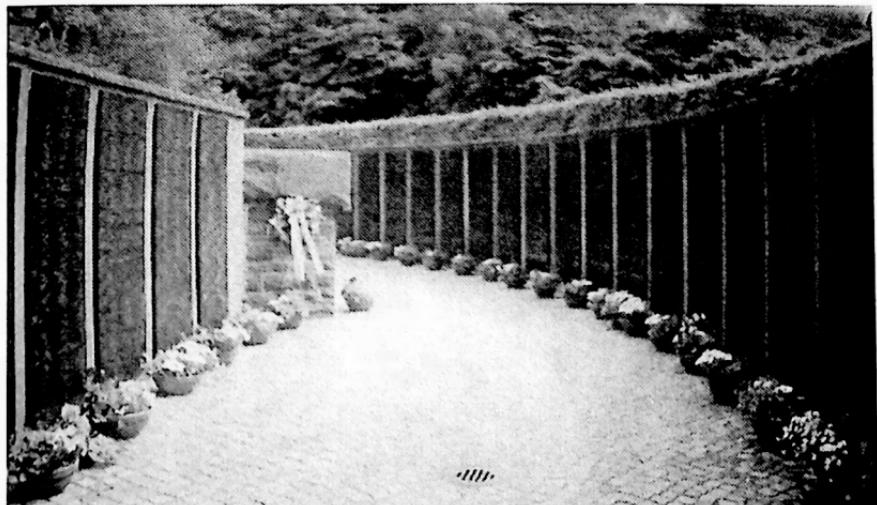
Klasse  
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Klasse  
Kaptln. (Ing) u. L.I.  
Stabsarzt.  
Schmiede  
Obltn. u. W.O.  
Ltn. u. W.O.  
Ltn. u. W.I.



Certificate drawn by author and signed by U-859's officers. Of the six signers, only Lieutenant Klatt, the Assistant Engineer, survived the sinking.



Author's cartoon of the "good life" for the U-boat man in tropical Penang. The reality was somewhat different.



The U-boat Memorial at Moltenort. The plaques contain the names of all of the men lost in U-boats during World War II. Over 30,000 men of the *Ubootwaffe* lost their lives between 1939 and 1945. A total of 757, of 1,167 U-boats commissioned, were lost to all causes, 648 during front line service.



This eagle monument overlooks the U-boat Memorial at Moltenort. The oval device at the top of the column below the eagle is the U-boat War Service badge, normally awarded to U-boat men after the completion of two patrols, but minus the swastika that was part of the original.

## Chapter Seven

### U-Büchel

In the meantime the second sibling had been fully loaded and cast off the lines which tied it to the pier in Kiel. It was the eleventh of April, one week after U-Jebsen's departure. Up on the bridge stood Freigattenkapitän Büchel, with his white commander's cap and much gold on his sleeves and the visor of his cap. Amongst U-boat captains of those days, he was old, already pushing forty, but he lacked the experience that goes along with such an age. He certainly had not grown up under the Nazi regime, and had missed out being indoctrinated with Nazi ideas at school, but he knew what was politically correct. One had to know that in order to survive or to get promoted.

When Hitler came to power, he was already seven years in the Navy. Being an officer in a Navy without ships, he could not help admiring Hitler's achievements, for he created ships and turned a shipless Navy into a real force. However, like many officers, he had his reservations about the Nazi organisation. Marching uniformed in the streets was for the armed forces. As a soldier, he found it disturbing how civilians were taking over the role of the military and the police.

The most numerous were the SA, who were dressed in a brown uniform and reinforced political correctness among the civilian people. Then there was the SS in their black uniforms. That was the political police, ruled by Heinrich Himmler. Even the kids were tightly organized, dressed in uniforms and marching like soldiers in the street.

Büchel was one of the first to command a U-boat, but he didn't do it for long. After a few successes he went ashore to teach others how to run a U-boat. Now Dönitz, with his shortage of good commanders and desperation, gave him the command of *U-860*.

Like Jebsen before him, he made a stopover in Norway's harbour of Kristiansand, to make sure that his boat was well supplied for the long trip ahead and then cast off. Unlike Jebsen, he chose the longer but safer route through the Denmark Strait, along the icy polar cap.

No convoys chose this route and there were no warships to fear. Even aeroplanes had a long way to come from Britain and he did not expect them here. Most of the time he sailed surfaced under diesel power to keep the temperature in the boat at a tolerable level. He also hoped to catch up with Jebsen, who had told him before that he would take a shorter route.

Leutnant Eckard Knobloch was OOD on the bridge. The boat was forging along the ice belt, but he was bathed in sunshine. The sea was calm and the water black where it sluiced past the speeding boat, leaving a white, foaming wake behind.

Knobloch also was the armament officer on board and he cast a worried look over his FLAK weapons. They were frozen stiff and had icicles dropping from the barrels. If an enemy surprised them from the air, the weapons would be completely useless. He decided to do something about that and called the off duty FLAK crew to the bridge.

After a few minutes two men crawled out of the tower hatch. They were the gunner, Alfons Robulewski, and the coxwain, Rudolf Vorsik. Both were heavily dressed for the arctic climate. With their duffel coats and woollen binis pulled over their ears they looked like teddy bears as they stomped towards their weapons.

Both men immediately started chipping off the ice and tried to turn the 3.7 centimetre cannon. Every moving part was frozen stiff and even when looking inside the barrel they found clumps of ice.

"*Fliegeralarm!* Bee on port!" a lookout suddenly screamed.

Knobloch spun around. Up in the sky he saw the enemy, then he looked at his useless weapons. He might just manage to dive deep enough for shelter.

"Crash dive!" he screamed down into the tower hatch. "All below!"

There was no time for an orderly dive procedure. They had to flood the tanks immediately.

Like rabbits, the lookouts disappeared down the hole and Knobloch himself was quickly on the ladder. The bow of the boat had already disappeared under water when he cast a last look around before he slammed the hatch shut. To his horror he noticed that the two gunners were still down by the 3.7. With their binis covering their ears they had not heard the alarm and only the slant of the deck under their feet had alerted them. Now in a sudden panic they dropped their tools and started to sprint towards the saving hatch.

"Run—run!" Knobloch screamed as the water rose to reach the tower structure.

Versik suddenly slipped on the icy grating and fell. He might have broken his ankle, for he had difficulty getting up again. Robulinski turned around and tried to help Versik, putting his arm around his fallen comrade to lift him up.

"Run Robulinski, run!" Knobloch screamed, horrified.

A type IXD2 U-boat is a clumsy weapon. It takes much longer to dive than an *Einbaum*, but once on the dive angle, it can not easily be reversed. Fifty hands had sent the boat down; they could not stop it any more.

Knobloch screamed in agony when the water reached the hatch and threatened to kill them all. He pulled his head between his shoulders and slammed the hatch shut, leaving the two men outside.

He did not hear the bombs, which exploded harmlessly after the boat had reached a safe seventy metres. In his mind, he only saw the faces of Versik and Robulinski before he slammed the hatch shut.

He did not have long to live, but during that short life ahead this picture of the two abandoned men would haunt him whenever he closed his eyes to sleep.

\* \* \*

**B**üchel had been lucky. Without harassment by the enemy he reached warmer waters.

He did not communicate with the BdU any more. If he called the BdU he would have to report the loss of the two men and he was reluctant to do so. He could report that they had been washed overboard in heavy weather, which was possible, and for which there were precedents, but that would not be true. It had been an accident and it was nobody's fault, but Dönitz had ordered that they travel submerged until well south

of Saint Helena. His surface passage, although necessary, had been in conflict with BdU orders.

Whilst Büchel hesitated to contact the BdU, who did not know whether *U-860* was still sailing or already rusting at the bottom of the Atlantic, Bletchley Park, too, had lost contact with him. Their purple line had stopped somewhere near the North Pole. Dönitz, from his portrait on the wall, looked down on the chart and seemed to smile.

Only King Neptune knew where Büchel was. He caught the boat as he tried to sneak across the equator and came aboard. He was rough on the youngsters who never before had crossed the line and they were duly initiated.

Büchel still hesitated to contact the BdU. He hesitated until he had passed Saint Helena, the point after which the BdU permitted surface travel. Büchel surfaced and the warm sunshine brightened his sombre mood.

He contacted the BdU, reported his position and the loss of the two men, who had been washed overboard in heavy weather. The BdU did not mind the two men and was glad that at last he had found Büchel. He was pleased.

Bletchley Park was pleased, too. At last they had found the lost *U-860*, and at a most convenient place, too. Now Büchel's wake again showed on the chart at the U-boat Tracking station and it went dangerously close to that of the American aircraft carrier *Solomons*, which was lurking south of Saint Helena.

Immediately the carrier was alerted.

Büchel was happy. He had a clear conscience again and enjoyed the cruise through the tropics. He was already sailing five hundred miles south of Saint Helena when Lieutenant George Edwards, flying a TBM Avenger and searching for Büchel, saw him.

The pilot radioed the carrier for assistance and, whilst flying a large circle around his intended victim, he could tell that the boat had seen him, too. Down on the water it did not dive, but always turned its stern to him, showing the dangerous FLAK, like a vicious dog baring its teeth.

Edwards kept out of range of the FLAK, but remained close enough to discourage the boat from diving. No commander would dive his boat with an enemy aircraft close by, for it could drop bombs whilst he was in the process of diving. At that time he is most vulnerable.

Edwards remained circling whilst he waited for reinforcing aircraft

from the carrier to come to his assistance. He had already spent many hours searching and noted that his fuel supply would not last much longer. Soon he would have to abandon the U-boat and return home. If he lost the boat and it dived, they might never find it again. He decided to attack alone. Like a bird of prey he suddenly dived down on the boat, shooting from all barrels.

"Fire!" screamed Büchel, as he saw the plane dive down on them.

Immediately the two double-barrelled 2 centimetre guns rattled noisily, punctuated by the Bum – Bum of the 3.7 centimetre cannon and the crew on the bridge could see the tracer bullets flying up to meet the attacking aircraft.

Edwards showed respect for the deadly FLAK and turned away before he was close enough to drop his bombs. He tried two more attacks, until a 3.7 centimetre shell hit him and blew a wing away.

Out of control the plane soared across the boat and plunged into the sea a hundred yards further. The boat went near the crash site, but none of the three aircraft crew had survived.

"Crash dive!" ordered Büchel, and the boat disappeared from sight.

Once tucked away safely at a depth of one hundred metres, Büchel went into his compartment to assess the situation. Once before he had commanded a U-boat. That had been *U-32*, but that was at the beginning of the war. Most of the time since then he had had a desk job and had to catch up on his experience. The past hour had been very educational. He had learned that aircraft respected his 3.7 centimetre canon.

It also had been an experience for the crew, most of whom were young, straight from U-boat school. Once his gunners got the hang of it, they would easily pluck the enemy from their arrogant height in the sky. He had fought an aircraft and had won without suffering any casualties.

He knew enough about the war to realise that this type of aircraft could not have come the long way from Saint Helena, and that there must be an aircraft carrier nearby. An Aircraft carrier also has destroyers for its protection, and it was time to clear the area before they started searching.

To expedite his departure from this area he needed diesel power and he waited impatiently for the daylight to fade and sheltering night to come.

One hour before sunset his patience was used up. The boat went up to fifteen metres and he looked around through his periscope. The sky and the surrounding waves were clear. Piece of cake, he thought. If an aircraft dared to show up, we'll give him the same medicine as the previous one. He waited until the tower had cleared the water, then he jumped up to the bridge.

The mood of the crew, too, was confident. They had not sunk a ship, but they had downed a plane. It was a victory over the enemy. Could they raise a pennant on the periscope when they entered the harbour of Penang? Of course, by then they would have sunk many more ships.

For hours now the aircraft from the *Solomons* had been searching the sea for Lieutenant Edwards' missing Avenger without finding anything.

Flying Officer William Chamberlain, in his Avenger, was the first to spot the surfaced U-boat in the distance. He refrained from attacking it alone and stayed out of sight. In the air, searching with him, were two Wildcats and another Avenger, which he now called on for reinforcement. After they arrived, the four planes coordinated their attack.

"Fire!" Büchel screamed, when the planes came into sight and one after the other dived down on them.

One of them must have been damaged early, for it veered off and returned to the *Solomons*, but the others kept attacking. First they just strafed the boat with their bullets, but then, Chamberlain seeing his fuel gauge moving towards empty, became over eager. He dived too low as he dropped his bombs, which gave the front of the boat a lethal blow, but their explosion reached up to him and tore open the belly of his own plane. A hundred metres further he plunged into the sea and he and his crew were lost.

Büchel and his gunners faced only two more planes, a Wildcat and an Avenger, but the boat under their feet was sinking. With a gurgling sound the Diesels stopped and the boat lost all speed as it slowly disappeared from sight, leaving the survivors swimming.

Büchel, his executive officer Otto Carls, and eighteen members of the crew remained drifting without life jackets for another few hours before they were picked up by the destroyers U.S.S. *Herzog* and U.S.S. *Straub*, which accompanied the carrier.

Lieutenant Knoblauch did not survive the battle. All but two of the survivors had been on the bridge. The other two had been in the central control room and quickly exited through the tower hatch before it flooded.

It took a few weeks before Dönitz learned what had happened to U-Büchel. He heard it at last from the enemy transmission Calais

## Chapter Eight

### U-Oesten

**U**-Oesten had been all packed and ready on Hitler's birthday and cast off her lines in Kiel. He was the most experienced commander of the four sibling boats, and was the only one who already had earned the Knight's Cross. At the beginning of the war, when boats were still primitive, he had inflicted losses to the enemy with his *Einbaum*, *U-61*. It was only 250 tons in size, but could shoot deadly torpedoes like a grown up one.

Later Oesten changed over to *U-106*, and in her earned his Knight's Cross. He was a successful man and eager to protect his Fatherland, but he was not overly enthusiastic about his job. He was a nationalist, but he did not like the Nazi organization.

Already a Navy officer in 1938, he was disgusted about the way some fanatical Nazis abused the Jews and smashed their shop windows in the *Kristallnacht*. He donned his uniform and went to some Jews he knew to apologise for their harassment. There was nothing else he could do but watch the Nazis growing from strength to strength.

Of course, when England declared war on Germany, he had to defend his country and he did so enthusiastically. That did not mean that he liked his job.

The bridge of a U-boat is a hostile place. It is only glamorous when entering harbour after a patrol, victory pennants fluttering from the per-

iscope, with a military band playing triumphant march music to receive him.

Out at sea the bridge is the most miserable place on Earth. Like a predatory animal the angry waves reach out for you, try to tear you off the boat to be swallowed in its black, hungry depths. After he had handed over his *U-106* to another commander, an entire bridge crew was swept overboard during a patrol. The relief crew opened the hatch, went up and found the bridge empty. The boat had sailed for the past hours in hostile weather without a single man on the bridge to watch it.

After his successes with *U-106*, Oesten left the boat to become commander of the ninth U-flotilla for a while. There followed another desk job, as staff officer for the North Sea Fleet. He had liked his jobs away from the icy waves, but when Dönitz started to build up his Monsoon fleet, he could not afford to have experienced commanders sitting behind a desk. He reached into his mothball box, dusted Oesten off, and put him on the bridge of the new *U-861*.

Oesten had a clear mind, which could not be fogged up by Goebbels' propaganda speeches, or even the charismatic Hitler. He did not believe that Germany could still win the war. Already, some time back, he had made a bet with his father-in-law that within a year they would have to fight against America and he had won the bet.

He did not want to speculate any further. Once, in the early '30s, he had admired Hitler as he saw how a humiliated Germany was lifted from its misery and had her pride restored, but these times were long gone. Now he was disillusioned. For him there was nothing else to do but to do his duty and fight to fulfil his oath to the Führer and his country. In his criticism of the government he was wise enough to shut his mouth. He had seen what happened to the U-boat commander Kusch. Whilst Oesten was still sitting on the bridge of his boat, Kusch had been executed by a firing squad.

*U-861* did not have a snorkel. That meant he had to travel most of the distance under water. After leaving Kristiansand, the boat inched along at the slow speed of two miles per hour towards its destination on the other side of the globe. A pedestrian at a brisk walk could have kept up with him. It also would be most uncomfortable, since Oesten had chosen to take the longer, but safer route through the Denmark Strait, north around Iceland.

All the time it was cold in the boat so, soon after he left Norway,

he surfaced and proceeded under diesel power. Like the boats that preceded him in April, he did not communicate with the BdU, so Bletchley Park did not harass him. Unmolested, he travelled along the ice belt and from there he turned south, giving the black hole of the Atlantic a wide berth.

He headed for the coast of South America, which had been his stomping ground when he had operated with his old *U-106*. Towards the end of July he had reached the coast of Brazil. Envously, he admired through his periscope Rio de Janeiro, which was peacefully illuminated like his hometown, Berlin, many years ago. These people could ignore the war.

Hanging around for a few days, he bumped into a troopship. It was the Brazilian 1,700 ton SS *Vital de Oliveira*. He sank the ship with one torpedo.

A few more days he idled down the coast of Brazil and met up with the American convoy JT-39. Out of this he picked the American 7,000 ton liberty ship *William Gaston*. It carried a load of wheat and did not take long to sink, but the 61 survivors had enough time to save themselves in their lifeboats.

Oesten did not have long to survey this scene of destruction, for soon the protectors of the convoy, Task Force 41, were on alert and searching for him. For a few hours they played cat and mouse and in the end Oesten got away without booking another victory.

He was glad that there had been no casualties, but the day before, when he hit the troopship, there would have been plenty. He regretted it, because it all was such a waste. Germany was surrounded on three sides by Russians and Americans and had no hope to win the war. But here he had to go on, still killing more people.

He could not share his worries with anyone. Most men of his crew were very young. They had served their school years during Hitler's time, at an age when the human brain is a sponge, absorbing all information and locking it away to last a lifetime. Most of them still believed in Hitler and fought for the final victory of Germany.

So far Oesten and his crew were happy with their patrol. They had reached their most southerly destination and had passed the black hole of the Atlantic, where the majority of German U-boats had met their final fate.

Now they turned east to head for South Africa. Mostly they proceeded surfaced. A few times the Naxos operator gave radar warnings, but there were no bombs.

The only bomb that fell, came from Berlin. Some high ranking officers of the German army had tried to assassinate Hitler. An officer had placed a bomb near Hitler's legs whilst the Führer made strategic decisions at his headquarters in Rastenburg. The bomb went off, demolishing his headquarters, but Hitler escaped without a scratch.

What more proof did one need that Hitler was a God-sent creature? No mortal person could have survived an onslaught like this!

In the purge that followed many officers lost their lives. Even Rommel was implicated and had to die. Many people seemed to think that the only hurdle between war and peace was Hitler.

Oesten was glad that he was where he was. If he had been in Germany, he, too, might have ended up hanging from a meat hook. His antipathy for the Nazi organisation was no great secret.

The surviving officers, including Admiral Dönitz, were quick to renew their allegiance to Hitler and proved it by ordering that from now on, all soldiers in the German armed forces had to replace the international military salute with the German 'Heil Hitler' salute with outstretched arm.

Oesten was disgusted about this spineless attitude of his colleagues and ordered that on a U-boat that was not possible. Due to the cramped conditions, an outstretched hand could be a hazard on the many controls everywhere and endanger the boat and crew due to a possible accident. On *U-861* the military salute as internationally accepted remained in force.

Apart from the thinning in the ranks of officers, everything else remained as it was. The German armies retreated further, U-boats were sunk and, occasionally, still sank ships.

## Chapter Nine More Flieger

U-Jebsen had crossed the equator early in June. Of course, King Neptune did not let us slip past unnoticed and came aboard to inspect all newcomers. He came carrying a trident, which he poked at reluctant youngsters. His wife had decorated her hair with seaweed, which could not hide the fact that her bearded face was not beautiful at all. She looked a bit like Gunkel.

When my turn came to be baptised, I did not resist at all. I had already seen that those who resisted had to suffer more. Obediently I swallowed the juice they poured into me, which seemed to be a mixture of castor oil and bilge water. I trusted that the Doctor would not let them feed me anything that could kill me.

After Neptune was gone, the cruise became pleasant. Neptune's equatorial waters were indeed worth heading for. The boat was warm now, and soon the damp bedding dried and I looked forward to my four hours sleep in a dry bunk.

Under the deckplates in the E-machine room was my freshwater distiller. There I had a shower rigged. With the sea water now warm, like in a bathroom, I and the technical crew could have a shower with foaming sea water soap and rinse off two months of dirt from our bodies.

This pleasure did not last long.

Whilst back home the summer sun was shining down on the bombed

cities, we were heading into the southern winter. Warned by our Naxos radar detector, we managed to sneak unmolested past the carrier *Solomons*, and then were heading into foul weather. Jebsen communicated now and uttered a sigh of relief when he learned what had happened to Büchel. Unwittingly he had escaped the same fate.

Bletchley Park had a fix on Jebsen, too, but at the moment there was little they could do. He was too far past the *Solomons* and the weather he was in made a pursuit impossible. All they could do was to detour any ship he might have bumped into.

The waters around the Cape of Good Hope have had the respect of sailors since times immemorial. Here the waters of two oceans meet, competing to see which can generate the bigger waves. Rounding the Cape in a ship has always been a big achievement, and sailors who had done so were permitted to sit resting their feet on the table.

*U-859* drifted like a small chip of wood on the giant waves and in the boat half the weather-proven crew lay flat, filling the bilges with their bile. I had no trouble and stood firm whilst the floor heaved and rolled under my feet.

To give the crew a break, Jebsen sailed closer to land and to the sheltering harbour entrance of Kapstadt. Standing at night on the bridge of the surfaced boat, the lookouts marvelled at the lights of the brightly illuminated city, which reminded them of better times at home before the war. The lights illuminated the sky for miles around and there seemed to be no need to hide from threatening air raids and bomb attacks.

It was time to change the bridge watch. Kurt Obst slid down the ladder, dropped his foul weather gear and tried to squeeze past the wireless room towards his forward quarters.

"What's it like up there?" Gaudeck, the wireless operator, asked. "The weather seems to have calmed down."

"The weather is still there," said Obst. "We have found shelter in Kapstadt harbour. You should see those lights."

"What lights?" Gaudeck asked, alarmed, and looked confusedly at his round monitor screen. With his *Hohentwiel* radar he could see farther than Obst with his good eyes. On the screen there was nothing to be seen.

"To port, of course," said Obst, and went on towards his quarters.

Again Gaudeck looked at his monitor and twiddled with his controls.

The round screen displayed a green, horizontal line with a single vertical pip on it. Here was no echo. He turned his antenna and stopped facing it to port. Still no echo. The screen should have indicated land long before Obst could see it.

This he had to investigate. He went into the central control room and looked up to the bridge.

“Permission one man to the bridge!” he called out.

Schnitzler, the OOD, looked down from above. He saw Gaudeck and asked, “What for?”

“To check my antenna.”

“Okay, come up.” Schnitzler granted him permission.

Quickly Gaudeck climbed the two ladders to the bridge and looked around. There to port, close enough to touch it, was land—was a city and he had not seen it. He turned and looked up at his antenna. It was still there, facing Kapstadt.

“That thing is crook,” Gaudeck mumbled and slid down the ladders again. Back in his room he checked the *Hohentwiel* again. He rattled all connections and plugs and checked if they were firm, then he twiddled with his controls again. No good! There was no echo.

When he saw Jebsen on his way to his cabin, he quickly jumped up.

“The *Hohentwiel* is faulty, Herr Kaleu,” he reported.

Jebsen hesitated and turned.

“What? Can’t you fix that thing?”

“I’ve already checked everything, but I’ll keep working on it.”

“Yes, do that.”

Before Jebsen disappeared, he poked his head out again from behind his curtain. “Call Baudzus from the E-room,” he said. “He’s an electronics expert. Let him give you a hand.”

“*Jawohl, Herr Kaleu!*”

“Baudzus to wireless room,” the message went from mouth to mouth until it reached me.

I was raised from my sleep and hurried forward.

“Baudzus, the *Hohentwiel* is *kaput*.” The captain’s head again peeped from behind his curtain. “Fix that bloody thing!”

“*Jawohl, Herr Kaleu!*”

Confused, I turned and looked into the wireless room. I knew that the *Hohentwiel* was the radar, but I had never seen one and did not know what it looked like. In those days there was no special trade for men who

repaired radio sets. That work was done by electricians. I had a special interest in radio technology and it must have said so in my personal file. To call me an electronics expert was an exaggeration.

"That thing is *kaput*," Gaudeck's finger pointed to the monitor on which still flickered the green line, and which looked like an oscilloscope to me.

I knew how to handle an oscilloscope and started fiddling with the controls. The horizontal green line was standard to every oscilloscope, but the vertical pip fascinated me. I could shift it, but that was all.

"Kaput," I diagnosed to say something intelligent.

I was getting angry. I was on board to run an E-machine and not to repair radar machinery. What was I to do? I started rattling on all cables which led towards that monitor. To make matters worse, Gaudeck appeared with a circuit diagram and unfolded it on the table. It was a maze of wires and components. I could read it, and in the past I had repaired *Volksempfänger* sets, which had three valves, but here were more than twenty-five.

In the meantime Gaudeck had caught on that I knew nothing about radar sets and began to resent that the captain had sent for another man to tell him his business.

I rattled the input connection to the monitor and got a vertical flicker on the screen.

"Aha," I said. "The receiver seems to work, the fault must be in the transmitter."

I had not noticed that Gaudeck had unplugged a cable and laid it on the table. Again I studied the circuit diagram whilst I sat down on the table.

"RVP2000," I read off the circuitry. "Do we have spare valves for that?"

"Yes, plenty."

Gaudeck looked at me expectantly. Suddenly I jumped up as if stung by a spider. I had sat on Gaudeck's cable, which was the antenna output and carried 15,000 volts. I had burned my backside. Gaudeck was pleased and laughed.

"That proves that the transmitter works," I groaned, with a wry smile. "The oscillator is okay, otherwise we could not generate the output voltage."

"Yeah," Gaudeck agreed and chuckled, satisfied.

For the rest of the patrol the *Hohentwiel* remained unserviceable.

For three days Jebsen lurked at the entrance to Kapstadt harbour, hoping to find some targets there, but there was no traffic. He was disappointed.

In the after torpedo room the mate, Sievers, and his helper, Friedrich Noehles, had pulled the T5 torpedo out of its tube for maintenance. Bunks were pushed out of the way, block and tackle clamped on a sliderail for handling that heavy weapon.

The T5 was a sophisticated missile. It did not have to be aimed at a target. Just shot in the general direction of the intended victim. It listened for noises and exploded on impact. Of course, the U-boat that fired it had to dive quickly, lest the T5 turn around and go for the noise generated by the U-boat. It did not know the difference between a friendly noise and the noise of an enemy.

The T5 was propelled by electric power. The advantage of this over the compressed air driven torpedoes was that it did not leave a track of detectable bubbles and approached its intended victim secretly. The disadvantage was that, from time to time, it had to be drawn out of its tube to charge the batteries, to make sure that it was lethal at all times.

Whilst the men were working on the torpedo, the off duty crew was squeezed into the other corner, sitting on the remaining lower bunks.

"The boat is too small," complained Wichmann. "You would think they would have left us enough space so they could service the eel without robbing us of our bunks."

Rydzewski, who had the upper bunk, lay in it and yawned.

"What worries me," he said, "is that this boat is too big. If we get hit by a torpedo, the only way out is through the tower hatch, and that is a long way to run from here."

"Once I served on a Einbaum," said Wichmann. "There I slept near the tower hatch. Boy, was that cramped. Give me this boat any time. I'll gladly run all the way if necessary."

"Stop bullshitting," said Noehles. "When we're hit nobody runs to the tower hatch. I'd rather crawl out of the bloody hole made by the torpedo; that's much bigger." He had finished servicing his torpedo. "Let the Old Man see to it that we're not hit by a bloody torpedo. These things are dangerous. Now go and fit your bunks in place so we can get some sleep."

"Yeah," Wichmann agreed. "The Old Man is in it since the beginning of the war and he is still alive. He knows his business." He rose and went aft to rig his bunk.

Talk about torpedoes and dying on board can only be done in jest. Nobody broods seriously about this possibility.

The Old Man now decided that he had had enough of Kapstadt. There seemed no business to be done. The boat headed out into the raging weather again, but it had not far to go. As soon as we rounded the southern tip of Africa, the weather abated. Soon it became real pleasant. The lookout seamen, who had to suffer most during the raging storm, now enjoyed the pleasure cruise.

The grey, raging sea had turned to a brilliant blue, like the sky above, and a school of dolphins joined the boat, frolicking in front of the bow like a team of horses pulling a royal carriage. Alarmed flying fish jumped out of the water, soaring through the air and diving a hundred yards further back into the water. Some had trouble navigating and landed on the deck of the boat, where they lay flapping helplessly and could not take off again. A giant turtle flapped through the water to port, navigating towards the coast of Africa.

Jebsen was on the bridge, enjoying this calm before the storm. Some stormy action had to follow soon, to interrupt this peaceful pleasure cruise. Before he had come up to the bridge, he had had a look at Gutbrod's chart. They were in the middle of a busy shipping lane. All the tankers that supplied fuel for the Allied bombers had to come this way. That he had not bumped into one was nothing short of a miracle.

He had radioed the BdU to report that he was in position for some action and the BdU was pleased. Bletchley Park, too, was pleased. For the past few weeks they had all hands full to detour their traffic, now they could remove this hurdle.

Jebsen put his binoculars to his eyes to search for ships, which must be here, but so far seemed to have had evaded him.

"A bee, starboard ahead," called Obst from his sector.

Jebsen turned around and focused his binoculars. They were 260 miles from land at the latitude of Durban. There, just above the horizon was a single, slow moving plane, flying west to cross his track.

For two months now he had been sailing peacefully, without bumping into an enemy except for meeting up with the *Solomons*, and that was

a big bully. Too dangerous to tackle. This was a single plane. Should he dive? There still was enough time for that. He might as well give his gunners some target practise. He identified the slow moving plane as a Catalina. No match for his 3.7 centimetre FLAK.

"*Fliegeralarm!*" He called down the hatch.

Throughout the boat the off duty crew whizzed towards their battle stations. I was off duty and rolled out of my bunk. My air raid battle station was up on the bridge, next to the hatch, where I was part of the chain supplying ammunition to the guns from the storage below.

Nearly blinded, I stood on the bridge, holding a 3.7 centimetre shell cradled in my arms, and looked around. For three months I had been locked up in the hull below, without having been once up here in the fresh air.

I looked down at my arms. Down below they had looked clean and white. Now I saw that they were a sickly yellow, like the skin of an old man.

With my eyes adjusted to the outside world, I saw that it was beautiful. The blue-black of the water near the boat turned to a brilliant blue as my eyes turned towards the distance. The sky above, too, was blue, with a few golden fluffy cloud balls which hovered near the horizon. My eyes, which for three months had seen nothing but machinery, were feasting on the picture of the world, which was beautiful.

But this was not a pleasure cruise. Where was the enemy? Everybody looked ahead, so I turned too. There! A tiny spot above the horizon, looking like a fly which was heading west. Had that plane seen us? It would be disappointing if it flew away without us firing a single shot. The whole crew was itching to see that plane hit by a 3.7 shell from our gun, but it was too far away. Disappointed my eyes followed the plane, which seemed to disappear towards Africa.

There! No worries! The plane turned south. It had seen us after all, but was it going to attack? It was too far from land to ask for reinforcements, and, alone it was no match for our 3.7 cannon.

What we did not know was that up there in the air Flight Lieutenant Fletcher, with a crew of nine, had been searching for us for the past hour. Together with Flying Officer Cover, in a second Catalina, he had left Durban this morning to find *U-859*, as directed by Bletchley Park.

Flying at a safe distance he looked at the boat like a fox that was attracted to a trap. He hoped that Cover would soon show up, for he

knew the boat had a 3.7 centimetre canon, as well as two double barrelled two centimetre FLAK cannon. That was five barrels to fly into. He had five 250 pound bombs and five machine guns to face the barrage from the boat.

Impatiently he looked at his fuel gauge. He still had to fly all the way back to Durban and was running low on fuel. He could not wait much longer.

Down on the boat I stood and looked around. The gunner, Boldt, sat at the 3.7 and swivelled it threateningly. Nearest to me was Hein Ruprecht at a two centimetre. The gunner of the second two centimetre I could not see. All were itching to pull the trigger.

The gunners had the best positions on the bridge. They were hidden behind the bullet-proof shields of their guns, whilst all the others were exposed to bullets should the plane attack. It most likely would not come that far. Before the enemy would attack, our guns would have plucked him from the sky. What was he waiting for?

As I looked at the plane abeam of us to port, it suddenly turned and came diving like a falcon down on us.

"Fire!" called Jebsen, when the plane came within range.

Immediately both two centimetre guns rattled, with the *Bumm Bumm* of the 3.7 punctuating it like drumbeats. Fascinated, I watched our tracer bullets flying up to meet the attacking plane. Fearless it came down on us, firing from all barrels. The 3.7 had fallen silent and only our two centimetres rattled on to meet the plane, which had passed over us without dropping bombs and was now in a steep climb, shooting out of its tail.

At great height the plane made a stall-turn and again came diving down on us.

"Fire!" Jebsen screamed again, but only the two centimetre kept on rattling. The 3.7 remained silent.

"3.7 Fire!" the captain screamed again. "*Verflucht*, what are you waiting for?"

"3.7 is jammed," came the panicky voice of Boldt.

"*Scheisse!*" the captain cursed. There were rumours that the 3.7 was an unreliable weapon. Those who really knew the facts were rotting at the bottom of the Atlantic. "Fix that bloody thing!" the captain added.

Again the plane had overflowed the boat without dropping bombs. The diesels were running at full blast and the captain threw the speeding boat into wild curves whilst the bullets rained down on us, ricochetted

off the steel plating of the tower, and came flying from all directions. Frightened, like a whipped dog, I ducked behind the sheltering steel of the tower. Battle was not at all what I had anticipated.

Scholwin, an off duty diesel stoker, was squatting on his heels near me. He had rolled out of his bunk, dressed only in his elastic belly cover, which the Doctor insisted we had to wear in the tropics. Wearing no underpants, his balls were hanging down on the grating, but I was too frightened to be amused.

Young Ruprecht, the indoctrinated Hitler Youth near me, was either frightened out of his wits or had more courage than I. In a falsetto voice he screamed, "Comrades, we're fighting for the Führer. We will die for our Führer!" He kept pulling the trigger of his two centimetre without really aiming.

"3.7, how you go?" Jebsen looked at his silent weapon, where Boldt rattled on all movable controls.

"It's jammed, can't fix it, Herr Kaleu," came the answer.

"Shit!" Jebsen cursed and threw the boat into a wild starboard turn.

Relentless, the Catalina kept on coming, but as long as the diesels propelled the boat at full blast, the sluggish Catalina failed to get a good fix on the boat to aim its bombs.

In the meantime the bridge crew suffered casualties. Several men had gunshot wounds. Lieutenant Lask, the gunnery officer had a bad head wound. He was in a coma and was carried down the ladder by the ammunition crew. Boldt was dead, minced by the bullets from the plane.

Jebsen looked around and realised the hopelessness of the situation. Without the 3.7 they had no chance. The Catalina seemed to be steel plate reinforced, and was invulnerable like a tortoise.

"Clear the bridge!—All below!" he screamed.

Glad to escape the aircraft bullets, we all slid down the ladder. Someone wanted to collect the body pieces of Boldt, but Jebsen interrupted him. "Leave the body there!" he commanded. To Boldt it did not matter anymore if he sank to his grave naked as he was or sewn into a canvas bag. The safety of the boat was of prime importance.

Jebsen had decided that he could not win. Alone up on the bridge he had to entice the aircraft to drop its bombs and then try to evade them.

"LI, prepare to crash dive!" he called down, when we all were down in the central control room.

"Ten men out into the forward torpedo room!" the LI commanded, to make the boat nose heavy for a quick dive.

I remained at the back of the LI, so he did not see me to send me forward too. I preferred to remain near the tower hatch, which was the only escape route should the boat threaten to sink.

Through the round bulkhead hatch behind me I could see the thundering diesels, and the hatch above still showed the clear blue sky that suddenly had become hostile.

Up there was the Old Man, fighting a lonely battle with the enemy who threatened to kill us all.

"Crash dive!" Jebsen screamed suddenly, and I saw the blue sky disappear as Jebsen closed the hatch above.

"Flood all ballast tanks, diesels stop, E-machines full ahead, hydrofoils ten degree down!" commanded the LI and immediately fifty hands operated the controls, which threw the boat into a steep dive.

*Bumm—Bumm—Bumm—Bumm—Bumm!*

Five bombs fell near the boat. Glass shattered, the boat shook, the lights went out, leaving us fumbling in total darkness and from somewhere I heard the threatening hiss of water breaking in.

Was this what the end was like? What was I to do? In my subconscious mind I was programmed to run to the tower hatch and escape to freedom, but that was closed and locked. I had to submit, defenceless, to whatever happened to me.

Torchlight beams now cut through the blackness of the central control room. The torch of Obermaschinist Herling found some light fittings and he replaced some globes.

"Take her down to one hundred metres, LI," I heard the voice of the captain.

The LI's torch focused on the depth gauge. It was already on two hundred metres, the maximum on the gauge's scale, and the needle was still slowly creeping beyond that.

"Hydrofoils ten degrees up," I heard the voice of the LI. "All crew from the foreship back to your places. Blow ballast tanks two and three—E-machines slow ahead!"

Some chains rattled as the operators turned their big, manual wheels and the man on the gyrocompass relayed the E-machine command to Rydzewki and Wichmann with his machine telegraph.

I kept standing in the central control room. With one arm I still held a 3.7 shell, with the other hand I held on to the ladder. The floor under my feet was still on a downward slant. The steering buttons of the helmsmen did not seem to work, for they had switched to manual control and turned the big steering wheels.

Herling had found some blown fuses, for suddenly the lights came on. The threatening hissing of water flooding the boat had stopped too, as someone isolated a busted pipe and now all eyes went to the depth gauge.

What was the maximum safe diving depth of a IXD2 boat? Surely not much deeper than the maximum on the scale of the depth gauge. It had already passed that and must be somewhere like two-fifty.

When a boat is submerged, the hull is compressed by the surrounding load of water, making it smaller and heavier relative to the surrounding water. It sinks faster the deeper it drops. Something had to happen any second now.

Anxiously I listened to the groaning hull that was already crackling under the weight of the water that carried it.

I looked at Jebsen and the LI. Both men were calm, with stoney faces. There was some sweat running down the LI's forehead. He took off his cap and wiped his sleeve across his face.

My eyes fell on the depth gauge. We must have been close to three hundred but, to my relief, the needle was creeping up again.

"Okay, LI." Jebsen's voice sounded a bit croaky. "Take her up to a hundred."

There was silence now. All men had returned to their bunks as the boat climbed from the brink of disaster up to one hundred metres. I disposed of my 3.7 shell and went aft, too, wondering how many boats had experienced this, but had a depth gauge which failed to stop before it reached three hundred, had anxiously listened to the crackling of the hull before the ribs of the hull crashed in a thunderous implosion...

## Part Three Raiders

### The last Battle Chapter Ten

U-Jebsen had survived the Catalina's dangerous attack, which easily could have been the end of our patrol. A quick checkup revealed that the damage inflicted by the Catalina was not fatal. Machine gun bullets had holed an outer fuel tank, which could be repaired by the crew. Worst of all was the bomb damage to the snorkel, which was holed and bent and could not be restored. The boat would have to approach Penang surfaced.

The sea was calm, but Jebsen dived down to one hundred metres where it was even calmer. The Doctor had to repair Lieutenant Lask and needed a steady operating table.

Lask had been shot in the head. A bullet had cracked his skull and the doctor hoped that it had missed the vital parts of his brain. Now Dr. van Gehlen had converted the Officers' Mess into an operating theatre.

At home the doctor was a gynaecologist and knew all about women. Here on board he simply was the doctor and had to know everything. If necessary he had to pull teeth, cut out a lung or kidney with a bullet hole or amputate a leg. Right now he was a neurosurgeon.

Carefully, with his tweezers, the doctor removed the bone splinters that pressed against the lieutenant's brain and restored the skull to its original shape. With his head safely bandaged, Lieutenant Lask was put back into his bunk. He was fortunate that, as an officer, he had a bunk all to himself and could lie there until he was well again.

God had worked with clay when he made his first model of a man; the doctor needed equal skill to work with his knife on living flesh. For a few days after, some of us were still bandaged, and limped at their work stations, showing signs of having been in a battle. I had been there, but I escaped without a scratch.

The men in the rear of the boat were still excited after the battle with the aircraft. Most men back here did not know how close we had been to disaster, when we jumped from the shovel of the devil. Not knowing what was happening outside, they just worked their machinery as requested by the machine telegraph. If the sheltering hull had cracked up when diving deep, they would have been surprised, their last scream gagged in an instant by an imploding mass of water.

Now they all were alive and laughing.

I told them about the heroic Hein Ruprecht, who wanted to die for the Führer, and they all were amused. Nobody had any intention of dying. For U-boat men, dying was treated only as a joke. Death was always close and one could not afford to brood on it.

Wichmann sealed the matter with a fart.

"Hey!" Paddy complained. "Don't do that, Erich."

"Don't be a sissy, Paddy," Wichmann laughed. "What do you do with your surplus air? Don't you ever fart?"

"Yeah, but not under your nose."

"Don't worry about that." Wichmann took a biscuit from his locker and chewed on it. "We have sixty-seven men on board and they all fart. Nobody goes out on the bridge to do it. They all do it under somebody's nose."

Chewing on his biscuit he looked reflectively up to the light.

"Come to think of it," he pondered, "a fart is pure energy. Back home in primary school I saw a boy dropping his pants. Another boy held a match to his fart. Boy, you should have seen the flame that shot out of him. Like the blow torch of a welder, it was."

"Erich, you're a swine!" Paddy protested.

"It wasn't me who lit the match," Wichmann defended himself. "I just want to tell you that a fart is pure energy. Your diesels run much faster with it."

Again he looked up to the lamp, which seemed to inspire him.

"I just invented a new secret weapon," he said after a while.

"Oh? What is that? Not a fart?"

"No, it's onions. If we are chased by a destroyer, the Smut should feed us onions. The gas we generate is all sucked up by the diesel and we would be twice as fast as the destroyer."

"Erich, you're a swine!"

"I'm no such thing. I just have a U-boat body that reacts as required. On my last leave I went home to Mum. I was at the dining table..."

"You didn't blow a fart, did you?" Paddy asked incredulous.

"Nah. Then the phone rang. I screamed, '*FLIEGER!* Jump up and run to the hatch. There *was* no hatch and I bumped into the door. I still have a scar to prove it."

His hand went feeling over his skull.

All were laughing. Subconsciously all knew that a U-boat was vulnerable, that even with the best captain at the helm, our lives hung by a thread, but all that apprehension was buried under rough jokes.

It felt good to be alive.

Up on the bridge Jebsen was worried.

He looked at Schnitzler and then again put his searching binoculars to his eyes to sweep the horizon. The BdU had directed him to sail further north, but wherever he looked the horizon remained empty.

For weeks now he had been smack in the middle of the world's busiest shipping lane and had not seen a single ship. Not that there were no ships!

U-Timm, who had left Kiel six weeks after *U-859*, had caught up with him and was operating in his wake. He was sinking ships right, left and centre. According to his triumphant message to the BdU, he had sunk five ships for nearly thirty thousand tons. To make matters worse, he had shot down a Catalina, possibly the one that had tried to sink *U-859*.

The BdU had given U-Timm orders to sail north to join *U-859* and Jebsen smiled and hoped Timm would bring his ships along, so he could participate in the bounty.

It was frustrating. Not only Timm was walloping in ships, Oesten,

too, was operating in his wake and had sunk four ships for nearly twenty thousand tons.

For them it seemed like target shooting at a carnival. Only Jebsen's horizons remained empty. Everything went wrong. On top of it came the news of Hitler's assassination attempt and he did not know how to take it. Hitler himself left him cold, and Jebsen wanted the war to end, but he still had to earn his Knight's Cross. He had hoped to earn it here in a week or two.

The crew was stunned that anything like this could happen in a disciplined country like Germany and their opinions were divided. There were some, like me, who were disappointed that the attempt had failed and saw Hitler as the only stumbling block between war and peace. Removing him could have resulted in us turning around and sailing for home sweet home. It still lived in my memory undamaged, as I had left it.

The other half—those were the younger ones—were outraged that some traitors had dared to harm their beloved Führer. The event was not widely discussed on board. As on all other Monsoon boats, the Heil Hitler salute was rejected and the previous military salute retained.

The survivors of the ships sunk by Timm were still floating in their life boats. One of these boats had reached an island and would still be there for another month before they would be discovered. The enemy would have had no clue of Timm's whereabouts, if it were not for Timm's own message to the BdU.

Bletchley Park could no longer monitor the U-boat traffic in the Indian Ocean. They had passed on their technology to the Ceylon Admiralty, whose division FECB now monitored all U-boat communications.

Disturbed, they learned about the loss of so many ships and would have liked to come down on Timm like a ton of bricks, but they were handicapped. Their own Task Force 66 was refueling in the harbour of Trincomalee and could not be mobilized.

They knew from the BdU message that Timm was heading north, so they scraped together all the aircraft from the African coast that they could muster and started searching for U-Timm.

Contrary to BdU orders, Timm had turned east. He had expended most of his torpedoes and decided to call it quits. Up in the air, the enemy searched the empty ocean. On the thirty first of August, after 750

flight hours, the enemy gave up and the search for Timm was officially abandoned.

J-Jebsen was high up north and still searching for ships.

Leutnant Lask was well again, With his bandages removed, his cap fitted on his skull again and he had resumed the second watch as OOD.

Jebsen was there, too, because he still had not figured out why his two siblings found ships in an otherwise empty ocean. He surely was not blind, but in the weeks he had cruised the Indian Ocean he had not seen a single ship. If he did not soon came up with some results, he would be a laughingstock back home.

"Ship masts to starboard!" Obst suddenly called.

Jebsen quickly spun around and searched the horizon in the indicated direction. It took him a minute to see what Obst had seen before. There—now he could see several masts. A convoy! What a stroke of luck. At last he had bumped into Timm's fleet of victims.

"Diesels stop, E-machines slow ahead!" Jebsen called down the tower hatch.

At once the hollow roaring of the boat's exhaust stopped and the boat drifted silently, like a predator in ambush. The captain remained focused on the ships and saw that they were heading north west to cross his own track in front of him. All he had to do is wait and pull the trigger.

"Clear to dive, all below!" Jebsen called when the ships could be seen with the naked eye.

All lookouts slid down the ladders and Jebsen went behind, slamming the tower hatch shut and locking it with the wheel.

"Dive down to fifteen metres!" he called down to the LI.

Sitting on his seat in the tower, he raised the periscope and focused on his victims again. Soon he was to be disappointed and sent the periscope down again.

"LI, dive down to a hundred metres!" he commanded and climbed down the ladder into the central control room. "They're warships," he added and slumped down on Gutbod's navigation chair.

Tough luck! Whilst the others found merchant ships to sink, he only bumped into the spikes of the enemy. Through his periscope he had seen four war ships approaching him. They seemed to have seen him already.

Gutbrod, who had his book of silhouettes ready, put the book aside. That book could not be used on warships.

In fact, the approaching ships were a task force, still searching for U-Timm. They were two destroyers, in company with the frigates HMS *Tay* and HMS *Banff*.

Jebsen rose and went into the wireless room. He took the GHG headphones from Silberhorn and listened. There was no doubt. There were no noises of reciprocating engines, such as diesel or steam engines. These were whining warship turbines.

With a sigh Jebsen handed the headphones back to Silberhorn and went back to join the LI in the central control room.

For a moment he stood brooding, trying to decide what to do. If he had not been in the grip of hunting fever, he could have dived earlier. Could have dived before the enemy detected him. Anyhow, it does not help to be wise in hindsight.

"LI, go down to two hundred metres," he commanded.

Diving deep was his only salvation. Depth charges are less effective at greater depth. They, too, have to work against the greater pressure of the surrounding water and have to explode closer to the intended victim to inflict their damage. Furthermore, on the longer way down they could drift off target, giving the victim more time to evade them.

Depth was the only thing that could save him now.

Whilst the boat went deeper on a steep slant, the noises of the approaching enemy could be heard by all the crew. Jebsen sat down in Gutbrod's chair and looked at the chart. His finger went searching along his track. There was another advantage to be used in his favour.

Their present position was very good. They were at the end of the Mozambique channel, which clashed here with the Arabian Sea. Waters of different density and temperature do not mix. They form different layers, which stay separated.

When hunting a U-boat, the enemy relies on his Asdic, which sends out signals similar to radar which bounce off the hull of the boat and are read when they return to the enemy. With waters of different layers, the Asdic signal does not reach the boat. It bounces off the different layers of water and gives a confusing reading to the operator.

Jebsen was satisfied. Should he dive deeper? He looked at the depth gauge, which had settled on two hundred. No need to take the risk. He could hear Asdic pings from all directions, but nothing seemed to hit the

boat. The various layers of water looked like targets to the enemy and now they started throwing depth charges at them.

For the veterans of the crew it was a strange experience. They already had lived through attacks like this. They knew that an Asdic can detect only ahead of it. It cannot see sideways, straight down or what is behind. Consequently, they listen to the approach of the enemy, know when he is overhead, and when it is time to pull the head between the shoulders like a threatened turtle.

In the silence of the boat they listen to the initial splash of the bomb in the water, in their mind seeing it drop down, hearing the pistol click and then the thundering explosion, which usually shakes the boat with an iron fist.

Here everything was different. All noises became garbled and they wondered if they above could not sink each other.

They could not help feeling scared. Fear is a natural phenomenon. It is needed to produce adrenaline, which enables the body to develop superhuman strength to rescue the body from lethal danger.

On a U-boat adrenaline is wasted. No superhuman strength could save the boat when it is holed and sinking, but the fear in the face of danger is there.

Now it counts how well one can hide that fear and how well one can control one's facial muscles. Some try a joke, but most of them remain silent.

All men in the central control room looked at the captain. His face was stoney. "Steer one hundred eighty degrees," he addressed the helmsman. His voice was steady.

That was a good decision. The enemy would not expect them to backtrack and they could leave these waters before the bombs stirred and mixed the water and they could get an Asdic fix on them.

At nightfall everything was silent and they turned north again to follow the orders of the BdU.

They passed the battlefield, where no damage had been done except for some dead fish that were drifting, upside down, in the water.

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**J**ebsen was not discouraged.

He was the commander of a U-boat and as such he had to sink ships. He had started a promising career and had even been a teacher, telling other commanders how to hunt ships (some of them even famous

aces by now), and here he was lurking in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes with no ships in sight. There was more traffic on the Wannsee in Berlin.

For three days he lurked at the entrance of the Gulf of Aden, then he dared to penetrate into these shallow waters and dropped to the sea bed, just listening in silence.

Nothing.

After another day the LI protested. There were strong currents which pulled the boat along the muddy bottom and the LI feared damage to his hydrofoils or even the outer tanks. They surfaced again and sailed towards Socotra Island. It would be a miracle if they would not bump into a ship soon.

And they did.

It was midnight when the GHG detected a ship to port. The night was black, but Jebsen saw a ship nearby, which he estimated to be a 10,000 ton tanker. He fired three torpedoes, of which one hit. He was in shallow waters, with not much room to escape should he be attacked, so he did not linger.

Now he had two ships to his credit. That was not much, but looking at his fuel consumption, the LI advised heading for Penang. They already had made 20,000 miles, which was nearly once around the globe.

Some months ago Germany had two U-boat supply ships in the Indian Ocean. They were the *Brake* and the *Charlotte Schliemann*, but Bletchley Park had found them and under attack, both of them had scuttled themselves. Now all U-boats had to make it all the way from home to Penang.

We in the after room were quite happy. We had no reputation to uphold, and were not in line for the Knight's Cross. All we were interested in was a tropical island with some swaying palms, some sandy beaches and some Hula Hula girls.

We kept ourselves busy whilst the boat drifted fuel-savingly along, still listening with the GHG. It was entertaining when a sailor from up-front came to visit Noehles. He had a photo album to show us, in which he had registered all his conquests ashore. Underneath each photo, blond or brunette, was a lock of dark, curly hair. We all admired the girls, especially the curls in the hair underneath.

"Haven't you any blond curls, or red ones?" Rydzewski was interested.

"Once I had a red one, but she was very protective of her curls. She wouldn't let me snip them off."

"That was mean. She could have grown enough of them for all of us."

Girls were the favourite topic of conversation. Nothing is better to keep the mind from brooding apprehensive thoughts than the girls ashore. And brooding comes easily when you lie in the bunk and imagine that less than an inch of steel separates you from the blackness sluicing along it, which is mostly many thousand feet deep and carries a torpedo aimed right at your bunk.

When idling in the bunk underneath the foaming waterline one can wallow in all kinds of black thoughts. Let me think of curly crotches any time.

I, too, got a visitor sometimes. It was the seaman, Obst, from the forward quarters. The one with the good eyes. He came because I had a little booklet—not with pretty girls to admire, but it was a travelling booklet full of English phrases. We thought, since we were headed for foreign shores, where the girls all spoke English, we might as well give ourselves a head start and become fluent in their language. We learned the phrases:

"How much does it cost?"

"Where is the hotel?"

"Where is the train station?"

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

This was not really what a sailor on shore leave needed, but it was a beginning. What we really needed were phrases like, "You are beautiful."—"How about a kiss?"—"You have nice tits."—but such useful phrases were not in the book, so relentlessly we kept memorising, "How much does it cost?" In the hope that even that phrase one day might come in handy and, once ashore, we would learn more explicit phrases whilst practising.

We now sailed in an area of high intrigues.

In all directions, wherever our bow pointed, there was oil and only Great Britain sat on it. Queen Victoria had been devious enough to confiscate it all. The Americans thought that was not fair. They were the greater power and should have a slice of it. The trouble was that the

Britons were their friends. How do you extract your friend's possessions without hurting his feelings?

They sent their special envoy, Parker Hart, to the Middle East to find some diplomatic solutions, if possible make some underhanded deals with some Arab sheiks.

Parker Hart put his head together with Sheik Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, the king of Arabia. Behind closed doors (or closed curtains in a tent) they worked out a deal.

As a result of that, the liberty ship *John Barry* left Philadelphia on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1944, bound for Arabia with a belly full of secret stuff. She had a crew of forty-four and twenty-seven Navy gunners. She was armed like a porcupine.

Up to Suez she sailed inconspicuously in a normal convoy, but then she separated herself and sneaked at thirteen knots along the Arabian coast on her secret mission.

Sneaking speedily, she bumped into Jebsen.

Of course, Jebsen did not know anything about the importance of the *John Barry* and guilelessly aimed three torpedoes into her secret belly. One struck the middle. The ship stopped immediately. It despatched an SOS and all the crew went into the boats. Jebsen gave them 30 minutes to clear the ship, then sent a second salvo at the ship and immediately all her secrets went to the bottom of the sea, which was at that place eight thousand feet deep.

The survivors of the *John Barry* did not drift for long alone in that busy shipping lane. Ships were everywhere, they just avoided parading in front of Jebsen's deadly torpedoes. All sixty-three men were picked up the next day and Parker Hart hit the roof. He complained to Washington about the lack of protection in English waters and Washington, screaming revenge, came down on Britain like a ton of bricks.

Britain reacted immediately and mobilized every gun they had. Jebsen suddenly found himself hunted by Task Force 66 and Task Force 65. They consisted of the aircraft carriers HMS *Shah* and HMS *Begum*, nine frigates, and the destroyers that went with them. They combed every inch of the ocean and found a hundred more survivors from the SS *Troilus*, a Blue Funnel liner which Jebsen had sunk the following day.

But what was so important about the *John Barry*?

Now, many years after the war, the secret is partly lifted. The ship had in its belly three hundred million dollars worth of silver, recorded in the

ship's papers as "non-ferrous metal." Partly it was minted in the U.S., not in dollars but in Arabian *Rials*. The rest was silver bars.

In 1991 robot technology was used to retrieve part of the load, but much of the secret remained below, as well as in Washington's dusty archives, to be revealed in another hundred years.

♦ ♦ ♦  
Jebsen got away with it.

For a few days he drifted deep, listening to the noises overhead, where the turbines of many ships combined to swell like the sound of a mighty church organ calling its flock to Sunday prayers.

Eventually the hunt was stopped. The hunting pack had found a U-boat and sent it to the bottom. Burkhard Heusinger von Waldeg's *U-198* was unlucky enough to have stumbled into this activity and became their victim, but not before he had sunk four ships himself.

With the hunt off, Jebsen dared to surface again at night. He was happy. He had sunk four ships, which was as much as Oesten had done. His sibling boat was already on its way to Penang. He, too, would sail for Penang now. Who knows, perhaps the Knight's Cross was already waiting there for him.

At night he dared to travel much of the distance surfaced. He liked to spend his time up on the bridge. The sea was calm and the breeze was gentle ruffling his blond beard as he listened to the hollow sound of the diesels, which propelled the sleek boat through the fluorescent sea.

High up over the sharp bow he could see the Southern Cross and back over the tail still was the Great Bear of the Fatherland, indicating that it still was there.

Down in the boat, the crew, too, was happy.

They had sunk four ships, which made for pennants that would flutter in the wind when they entered Penang harbour. I was happy too. I had made peace with Gunkel. He was getting on in age and was overdue to be promoted to NCO.

For that he had to pass an examination and needed some lessons in electro technic. Obermaschinist Herling sent him in his off duty time to me to receive those lessons and suddenly I discovered another Gunkel. Now he was my pupil, and underneath that rough exterior I discovered a real nice guy. He confessed to me that he had inherited his Boot Camp voice from his mother. She had been a tough old lady and nobody ever got away with cheating or disobeying.

Our patrol was nearly over and everyone was happy.

Nobody on board worried about the war, or even contemplated losing it. We were part of the German war machine and we had done our job. The Russians had reached the outskirts of my home town and Germany was only seven months from collapsing into a heap of total devastation , but none of us had any inkling of that.

Worse still, it was only hours from the moment when I would be fighting for a breath of air and most of us would meet an instant death.

Yes, we were a happy boat that day.

## Chapter Eleven End of the Line

**S**lowly U-Jebsen progressed through Southeast Asian Waters. It had been the first of the four sibling boats to leave Kiel and now it seemed to be the last to arrive. U-Timm, who had left six weeks after Jebsen, was already tied to the pier in Penang. Even Oesten must be somewhere ahead of Jebsen.

It had been a long patrol. Nearly six months. The technical crew had seen only artificial light in all that time. The inside of that big steel tube had become their home. The four hour routine had been entrenched into their natural way of life. After all that time they could not even imagine it to be otherwise.

But soon that would be changed. They had to become civilized again and the first indication was that the bushy beards had to go. No beards were permitted ashore and there they would be in a very few days. None of them could remember what they had looked like before their bearded days and to retain their present image, one by one they came up on deck to have their bearded photo taken.

Outside the world had changed.

They were on the other side of the globe and here the world was different. Especially the lookouts, who had suffered in storms before, now had the best place in the boat. They saw this new world from a privileged position. Often there were dreamy islands drifting close by. They were already in Japanese home waters and dared to sail close to the sandy

beaches of those fairytale islands which had swaying palm trees and black-haired girls, as one had seen in South Sea travelling books.

Down in the hull again, with ours beards shaven off, I found myself in the company of a bunch of strangers. The rough, bearded men who rather had looked like pirates, suddenly had turned into teenagers. Even myself I did not recognise any more. I looked rather like a frog without my beard. It would take a few days before I learned to recognise the many faces of my comrades again, especially those of the forward quarters, whom I did not meet so often.

There was not much time.

There really was not much time.

The last day of our long patrol had arrived. Originally we were scheduled to enter Penang together with U-Oesten and get some Japanese protection vessels. The German base, too, had some Arado floatplanes, but as we heard, Oesten was already tied safely to the pier in Penang (the second one of us siblings) and for us there was no protection. (Who needs protection when one has arrived home?)

So we sailed alone. In about three quarter of an hour we were scheduled to tie up to a pier in Penang. We were travelling surfaced, under full diesel power, four pennants fluttering from the periscope and the red ensign of the German Kriegsmarine fastened to the rear of the *Wintergarten*.

A splendid picture of a successful warrior!

A splendid picture of a successful warrior.

That was what Lieutenant Commander Arthur Hezlet thought as he focused on U-Jebsen through his attack periscope.

The Admiralty in Ceylon\* had by no means forgiven Jebsen for sinking the *John Barry*. From Jebsen's communications they soon learned that they had sunk the wrong boat with their task force and that Jebsen had slipped away.

No harm done.

That soon could be rectified. From their home base at Trincomalee they operated a fleet of submarines that sailed in Japanese waters as safely as at home in Scapa Flow. The Japanese had no radar and were not equipped to hunt submarines in these waters.

Ceylon knew U-Jebsen's destination, and since they could read his wireless communications, they also knew his exact arrival time. All they had to do was to direct their submarine, HMS *Trenchant*, to the gates of Penang Harbour and wait for Jebsen.

Of course, no plan is foolproof.

It all still could have been thwarted had the German Arado been in the air, but that morning, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September, the plane had found no suitable takeoff water.

And so Lieutenant Commander Arthur Hezlet, floating with his submarine near the surface, turned his four stern tubes towards U-Jebsen and released three torpedoes, which were compressed air driven, and pointed their visible bubble wakes towards the happy, but unlucky boat.

Down in *U-859* Jebsen summoned his officers. Much work was to be done. Roster schedules had to be drawn, necessary repairs to be scheduled. Once, when near Madagascar, the starboard diesel had burned out a bearing, which had been repaired, but it still had to be checked to determine if it was good enough for the long trip back home.

With all officers assembled the watch engineer, Leutnant Klatt, suddenly pulled a wry face.

"Permission to go to the toilet, Herr Kaleu," he asked. For days already he had some uncontrollable bowel troubles.

Annoyed, Jebsen looked up. "Does it have to be now?"

"Jawohl, Herr Kaleu!"

"Okay, then go, but make it snappy!"

"Jawohl, Herr Kaleu."

The young officer disappeared towards the forward bulkhead and the other officers sat down on the table in the officers' mess.

Back in the after torpedo room I was laying in my bunk. There was an air of anticipation surrounding me. Some had fished their khaki uniforms from their lockers and admired them. Soon we would be lining up on deck when we entered Penang Harbour to the tune of triumphant march music.

Over my feet I could see through the hatch into the E-room. Wichmann was at the Battery logbook, Rydzewski stood at his switchboard, correcting the rate of charge with the hand wheel control and even the NCO, Obermachinist Herling, was there.

All were already dressed in their khaki uniforms, because once we arrived in the harbour and the engines were shut down, there was no time for dressing any more.

The NCO, Herling, looked funny. His black, bushy beard was gone, but he was dressed in his tropical khaki uniform. From his short pants protruded hairy legs as black as his beard had been. The men on duty were all ready to go up on deck as soon as we tied up in Penang.

Up on the bridge, Obersteuermann Gutbrot was the OOD. He and his lookouts were already dressed for the reception at the pier in Penang.

The lookouts had the time of their life. For days now they'd had bridge duty in the tropics and at every watch there were new sights to see.

Normally there were strict rules for them. Under threat of court-martial, they could focus their binoculars only on their given sector. If their sector was to starboard, they could not see an island with naked girls to port. But now, heading home, rules were relaxed. All binoculars looked to port where the coast of Malaya materialized out of the hazy horizon.

Nobody saw the deadly bubble trail of the torpedoes coming in from the starboard side. If Obst had been on the bridge, he might have seen them coming. A sharp turn in time to port might have changed the fate of *U-859*, but now the boat was doomed.

Back in the after torpedo room I, too, had to get ready. I opened my locker to get to my khaki uniform. I had put it off until the last minute, because we were near the equator and with the diesels running at full blast, it was forty degrees here, and probably sixty up front at the diesels.

Now I was naked, except for my tropical underpants, which were made from a flimsy perforated netting fabric. Well, heat or no heat, we had to get dressed. I took a towel first and wiped my sweating chest before I prepared to roll out of my bunk.

*PUMMM!*

An ear shattering explosion. I lie somewhere on the floor. There is

total blackness, like in hell. Nobody speculates what has happened. Everybody knows instantly. *This is the end.*

So do I!

My body immediately discards the brain and my subconscious mind takes control.

The tower hatch!

Like a ball, my body bounces from the floor and flings itself toward the hatch to the E-room and the aisle beyond it, which leads to the life-saving tower hatch.

In that total blackness, my hands get an unfailing, firm grip on the two handles above the hatch and I set out to fling myself through it with my monkey swing, when my body hesitates. Out of the hatch blows a firey hot storm wind, which singes my hair. The next moment that firey storm wind is replaced by a metre-thick water jet, which threatens to dislodge my grip on the handles, but grimly my body clings to it.

It all lasts only seconds, then the after torpedo room is flooded. We can feel that we are sinking. I stretch my neck to find some air and bump against something metallic. There is total blackness and total silence.

Slowly my subconscious mind gives up and hands my body back to my brain. It is now clear to me what has happened. We share the fate of hundreds of other U-boats who were sunk before us. We are sinking now.

Everything in me protests against my fate. For Christ's sake, why now! We were nearly there!

There is still some air left in our compartment. The slowly rising water makes me climb higher and I realise that there is a ladder tied to the ceiling. It is used to climb to the torpedo loading hatch when in the harbour.

The torpedo loading hatch!

There is an exit. I force my body through the rungs of the ladder and sit on what we call the match stick. It is a four inch removable steel beam which has to reinforce the hull at the weakened place of the hatch.

Reassuringly my hands lock around the opening wheel. All is not lost, but my brain tells me that I can not open it, lest all air of our room escapes and all others around me will drown.

With a slight bump the boat settles on the sea bed and remains level. There still is total blackness. There should not be. We have emergency lights, with backup batteries, but nobody had looked at those batteries during the last six months. They don't work.

My hands try the opening wheel. It works and turns easily. All is not lost. All I have to do is open the hatch and climb out to freedom, but how deep are we? Find out!

"What was the last depth sounder reading?" I scream into the empty blackness and wince. With the increased pressure in the hull my voice sounded scratchy, like that of Donald Duck.

"Fifty metres," an equally distorted voice comes back.

I relax. That probably had been Lothar Jesse, who worked in the central control room and always knew what was going on. I am not concerned any more. All around me I can hear my comrades splashing as they prepare to get out of the stricken boat.

I should be down there with them, looking for my *Tauchretter*, the escape gear which helps me breathe under water. That thing should be somewhere under the mattress in my bunk, but where was my bunk? Was it still in place down there somewhere under water? Or had somebody else found it and strapped my escape gear around his own neck?

As it was, when this hatch was opened I would be the first man out. If I left this place, someone else would take it and I would be somewhere down there, possibly without any escape gear. I decided to stay put and risk the exit without any equipment. My first place in the queue at the escape hatch seemed to be more important than the possession of my *Tauchretter*.

I could hear the others splashing now. Suddenly I lost my foothold as someone removed the ladder, which until now had obstructed the exit hatch. Everybody except me operated with well trained efficiency.

Suddenly an ear piercing sound broke the silence. I winced and got frightened.

The T5!

That most dangerous and unpredictable of all weapons on board had started running. After all these preparations, were we still condemned to be blown up by our own torpedo? We would not be the first U-boat to be blown up by their own T5. I could still open the hatch and scram!

I resisted my impulse.

After a few seconds the sound died down as the torpedo mate, Sievers, in total blackness had diagnosed what had happened and shut the torpedo down.

Someone else came up now and sat next to me on the match stick. Now four hands were clutching at the escape wheel. Of course, I could

not see anything, but the vibrations of the man next to me said that he was my offsider, Reinhold Weich.

Scratchy voices could be heard now as it was checked that everyone was ready and equipped to get out. All seemed to be equipped and ready. I was the only one to exit without equipment.

"Okay, open up," came the order from Mate Sievers at last.

Both of us up on the hatch turned the wheel now and watched the green split around the round rim of the hatch grow wider and wider. At last the clamps were released and we pushed the hatch wide open until it clanked into its locked position.

I do not remember what happened to the man next to me, but I took a deep breath and went out with the remaining air. Suddenly I was floating free and there was green light all around me. I remembered what they had told us in Neustadt about the bends and busted lungs and I floated upside down, trying not to ascend too rapidly. All the time I released air from my lungs, which seemed to be inexhaustible. Dimly I realized that at that depth and pressure, I had five timers as much air in my lungs as I would have had on the surface.

Like glittering pearls my air bubbles floated ahead of me in my green surroundings, which grew lighter and lighter. I was in no panic. Everything went smoothly. I seemed to have plenty of air in my lungs, and still plenty to spare when my feet suddenly broke through the surface.

There was the sun!

I had made it!

I spat in the water and saw to my satisfaction that there was hardly any blood. In the warm tropical water I turned on my back and looked up to the blue sky and the golden sun.

I was blissfully happy.

Lieutenant Commander Hezlet's torpedo had hit U-Jebsen at the bulkhead between the diesel room and the central control room, right next to diesel mate Gunkel, and broke the boat into two halves. All crew in the E-room, the diesel room, and the central control room were killed instantly. The bridge crew, too, were punished without delay for their neglect. None of them survived.

So as not to be disturbed by the noise of the diesel, the LI had closed the hatch to the rear of the officer's mess, and all crew forward of this hatch survived the explosion.

The only battery in the boat was in the front half. Whilst the rear half had no electricity, the front half had the battery. Apart from a few circuits that were shorted out and had blown their fuses, the front half still had some light. There were two compartments: One compartment for the officer's mess, the NCO and mate's quarters, with the battery underneath, and the forward torpedo room with the seamen's quarters.

About twenty-five men would have been alive when the front half sank to the bottom. The bulkhead must have had a crack, because water broke in and filled the boat. Not instantly, as in the stern, but rising slowly and steadily. The battery underneath was cracked and flooded, and it produced poisonous chlorine gas as the acid mixed with the salty water.

All NCO's were on duty preparing the boat for the arrival and died in the rear at their departments. The assembled officers and Silberhorn died from battery gas, before they could decide how best to save themselves.

The remaining men, the mates including Leutnant Klatt, who emerged from the toilet in the same compartment, but further forward, had less trouble deciding what to do. They were near the forward hatch, and when the chlorine gas stung their throats, they quickly saved themselves into the front torpedo room, which had no battery underneath.

The forward room was crowded now.

After the whole compartment was flooded they followed the same exit procedure as we did in the stern. Many men lost their lives in the process and not all reached the surface to see the sun again.

In the final balance, ten men out of twenty from the front were to survive. They were Leutnant Klatt, six mates and four sailors. Compared with that, we in the rear fared relatively better. Eight of us survived to see another day.

Whilst everybody was busy fighting for his life, I got a rude awakening. Suddenly it struck me that seeing the sun again does not solve the problem. For our boat, Penang could be reached within minutes, but I could not swim that way. I looked around and found myself alone, miles from land in shark infested waters. The minimum a shipwrecked sailor needs is a life vest, maybe even a life boat.

The Navy had provided for this. Down there in my bunk was a life vest and even an inflatable rubber raft. I had neglected to take them along.

Concerned, I looked around, looking for the threatening fins of sharks. Near me a head popped out of the water, blood running from his mouth, then he disappeared again. Now I saw more heads drifting on the water, all of them alive, searching for land.

Very near to me I recognised the diesel mate from my duty watch. He did not look very healthy. Having been off duty, he was in his quarters and had swallowed some gas. He was well equipped, having a *Tauchretter* strapped around his neck and carrying a deflated, yellow life raft under his arm.

My hopes rose.

"Will you blow up the raft?" I asked.

"Doesn't work," he said. "The bottle is empty."

I was disappointed. I knew all rafts had a compressed air bottle, but they do not last forever. The designer probably had not counted on a six month patrol. These days U-boats were sunk within a week after departure.

I took the raft and inspected it. The bottle was flat alright, but I found a mouthpiece on it. My lungs felt strong and I started blowing. In no time I had blown up the raft like a big, yellow balloon.

We both climbed into it.

Now, from my elevated place, I had a better view. There seemed to be a lot more heads floating. Not far from me was another raft with Torpedo mate Sievers and Lothar Jesse in it.

Suddenly, a few waves further down something poked out of the water. It rose further, became bigger with water cascading down the sides, then I recognised it. It was a submarine. Not the familiar grey like ours, but more a beige colour. That must have been the culprit who had tried to kill us all.

Now, fully surfaced, men dressed in khaki and shorts appeared on deck and threw out lines trying to save us again. It seemed all they had wanted to destroy, was our boat, not the men who lived in it.

I did not want to leave the raft and swim to the enemy, because I might not reach it and when I came back for my raft, someone else could have claimed my place, leaving me for the sharks again.

I jumped back into the water and pushed the raft with my comrade towards the submarine, but I had been right. Before I came near those saving lines, they were withdrawn, the crew disappeared into the tower and the sub dived again.

Left behind I climbed back into the raft, which was built to carry one man, but with our legs folded tightly it could carry two. Three men came swimming to us and held on to our ratlines. It looked a bit crowded until we sighted Obst alone in a raft with another spare one in tow.

Soon we were organised. Jesse and mate Sievers had one raft, Obst and the Smut another, Bartzsch and Scholwin one and I, with the diesel mate, the fourth.

The final balance was that eleven men had been picked up by the submarine and we were eight in the raft. Nineteen men saved out of sixty six.

Our four rafts alone on that wide ocean cuddled together. What should we do? Paddle with our hands in some direction, or just wait until someone missed us and came looking for us?

"That bloody torpedo was a dirty trick!" cursed Walter Halm, the Smut.

"Why, did it spoil your soup?" Jesse managed a smile.

"Not my soup," the Smut pulled a key from his pocket and threw it into the sea. "It spoiled my birthday. Today I turned twenty-one."

"What a big birthday present," I observed. "Fireworks and all. What did you throw away?"

"That was the key to the cool room. My strawberry tart is still in it. I might as well leave it with the boat."

♦ ♦ ♦

**T**wenty four hours we drifted in the rafts, our hopes rising and falling like the waves that surrounded us. First we saw the hazy Malayan coastline and paddled wildly in that direction, only to find that the currents were stronger than we and behind us the coastline of Sumatra appeared at the horizon. Does not matter. We turned around and paddled towards Sumatra, only to find that the currents had reversed and we drifted towards Malaya again.

Discouraged we let ourselves drift and looked at our damaged arms, which were wounded inside from scraping on the rough fabric of our rafts. All the time the sun, which I had missed so much for the past six months, was burning down on my bare back, turning my skin into water-filled blisters.

Once we sighted a native fishing vessel nearby, but on seeing us it fled, possibly thinking that we were enemies of the mighty Japanese.

Once, even better, a German Arado kept circling overhead, leav-

ing us speculating if the plane had seen us or not. No good. It had not seen us and just left us husky from waving and screaming to attract its attention.

At nightfall our hopes reached rock bottom. When darkness fell, we tied our rafts together. Nobody wanted to drift alone and we all pierced the darkness with our eyes. The water was brightly fluorescent and a shark fin could have been detected with ease. One bite into the yellow canvas of our raft would deflate it like a punctured balloon. Luckily there was no such beast around.

Above the water the night was black. Occasional fog patches turned into hallucinations, looking like islands with swaying palm trees and sandy beaches. It took only a small breeze and all was gone.

Impatiently our eyes pierced the darkness to where we suspected the horizon to be, for some sign of the rising sun. Like before, in the hull of the stricken boat, I yearned for the sun again, forgetting that it meant more torture for my sunburned skin.

At last, there was some light. Not rosy as I had expected, but a thin blue line heralding the next day. The blue soon turned rosy and shortly after the sun peeped above the empty water horizon.

Empty?

Looking around we found the water was not empty. Less than one kilometre away was land.

"Malaya," said Obst, taking a bearing by the sun.

Better still, less than five hundred metres away were islands with people on the beach. It all looked real, like in a South Sea travelling brochure.

Quickly we untied our rafts and started paddling again. Every raft aimed for an island and we paid no heed to our wounded arms, which already showed raw flesh underneath the scraped off skin.

Grimly, our eyes focused on the tempting land, we paddled so that the water foamed, only to admit that the currents here were stronger.

When the tempting land had disappeared from sight, we gave up and received another shock. We were all alone. Too much we had concentrated on the nearby land and whilst drifting away, we had lost contact with our comrades.

What now? I could not bear another night alone.

Discouraged we just sat down and hoped. The sun burned down on

me again, but I had no defence. Even a handkerchief would have helped if I could have draped it over my aching back.

Suddenly a scream.

There was nobody to scream around but my comrade in the raft. I looked at him.

"A boat!" he screamed excitedly and pointed to somewhere behind me.

I turned my aching body and screamed too. Indeed there was a fishing trawler, heading in our direction.

Pulling up beside our raft, Japanese slit eyes looked with hostility down upon us. We could have been English, in which case they would have put us out of our misery and shot us.

They made sounds which we did not understand and we tried to make clear that we were friends and Allies. Luckily the word *Deutsch* is similar to the Japanese word *Deutsu* and it slowly dawned to them that we were Germans.

Helping hands pulled us up and I was wrapped in a blanket. With hands and feet we made us understood that there were more shipwrecked men to rescue, and one by one we found the other three rafts.

On the twenty-fourth of September, 1944, *U-859* reached Penang—not with victory pennants swaying from her periscope, but in the shape of eight limping, dejected figures.

## Chapter Twelve

### Twilight of the Nazis

For me the war had ended.

I found myself in a brilliant white hospital bed, sheltered by an equally white mosquito net. The bed was not damp and did not smell with six months old sweat of Rydzewski in the sheets. My stomach was full and I could eat whatever I asked for. Coloured boys fussed around me in bare footed efficiency, fulfilling every wish I could possibly think of. I felt like I was living in a fairy tale.

Only hazily I thought of my comrades, who were now dead at the bottom of the sea. This life was what all of us had aimed for. All sixty-seven of us, and now we were only eight.

Germany was far away. I did not even think of it. Here German was being spoken, but this was another Germany. Here were no air raids, no bombs, no dimming of the lights at night, this was truly paradise.

The servants spoke only English and I tried my phrases on them. Some of them were useful. I could already say "Yes" and "No." I had done well to arrive prepared.

Less than a week I spent in hospital, then my cooked back had healed. I had been supplied with a new white uniform—nothing militaristic—only white shorts and a white, starched shirt to match. My legs were put into knee high, white stockings with black leather shoes. No headgear and no military adornments. I felt like a civilian already.

Before we eight shipwrecked men could start our lives ashore we had to be introduced to the Japanese authorities. For this we were thoroughly briefed. We were instructed not to mention that more men were saved and that some had found refuge on the English submarine.

That was politically incorrect.

In this part of the world, paradisiac as it might seem, a good soldier did not permit himself to fall into the hands of the enemy. Before that could happen, he killed himself.

We passed the examination of stern faced Admiral Jisaku Uozumi, who received us in full military uniform, samurai sword and all. I missed the famous Asiatic smile on him and noticed that only the Japanese were in uniform. All Germans, including the leader of our base, Captain Dommes, were in civilian clothes.

After a short holiday at the resort in the mountains of Penang Hill, where we experienced dense, tropical jungle life, we were reminded of the war again.

We met the men from the luckier boats, U-Oesten and U-Timm. We learned that after U-Timm, U-Oesten had sailed into Penang with flying pennants as we had anticipated for ourselves. The only hitch, Oesten reported the arrival of his boat in the international military manner, with his hand on the visor of his cap, whilst Dommes said, with outstretched hand, "Heil Hitler."

I was detailed to manage the wireless workshop in Penang. The Diesel mate, with whom I had shared my raft, and the seaman Obst, both went to U-Oesten for the trip back home and reached Norway on the last day of the war. U-Oesten was one of the very few boats ever to return from Penang.

Lothar Jesse, too, went into the central control room of another boat. It was the wonky, ex-Italian boat UIT 25, with which he sailed to Japan and really made it, but with great difficulty. There he still was at the end of the war.

Whilst I was privileged, enjoying life in peace in this tropical paradise, my homeland crumbled into ruins. The German air defence had broken down. Superior fighter planes had been invented, but they were not enough to repel the never ending swarm of enemy bombers that reduced my fatherland to rubble.

I ended up in Java when Nazi Germany collapsed. Most of us knew little of what was happening and had to believe what they were told. I always had a short wave radio set and knew more about conditions at home.

But even I was to be surprised.

Later I was a prisoner of war on a little Island outside Djakarta,

where we would spend another year. It was the island we had dreamed about—sandy beaches, swaying palm trees—only the Hula Hula girls were missing.

As a prisoner of war I had ample time to brood over my fate. I realized that all we had known about politics had been carefully filtered for us by the Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels. He made all of us think that only our country was the righteous one.

Looking back, I blamed Hitler as the only person responsible for the vandalising of Germany. Any person, with access to information such as he had, would have known in 1944 that the war was lost. At that time he could have stopped the war and prevented our enemies trampling over our land and the demolishing of many cities.

He might have had to die a year earlier, but that would have been one life to save millions.

Now, far detached from the Nazi propaganda machine, my brain functioned normally again and I started wondering how I could have been so gullible to become a soldier. I started wondering what was going on in the mind of Germans.

What was Hitler thinking?

In the olden days, a besieged country retreated behind the sheltering walls of a fortress and waited until the enemy got bored and went home. That was how Hitler acted.

He still seemed to live in medieval times. Each city he treated as a fortress, and expected the Russians to turn back when they encountered sufficient resistance.

Many German leaders lived in the Middle Ages. Even in the last week before the German capitulation, deserting soldiers were executed.

Koch, the Nazi leader of East Prussia, was not hanged in Nürnberg. He got a life sentence and still sits in a jail in Poland. He is still unrepentant. He maintains that a soldier cannot desert his post and has to fight—fight until he gets killed. A life means nothing to a man like Koch.

Since time immemorial, the German language takes care of that. A German soldier does not get killed at all. He “falls.” Falling is an honour. A Soldier is like a pawn in a chess game. He falls and is replaced by another one.

A life meant nothing to Hitler. We all were pawns. Only his own life mattered. Thousands were killed whilst he grimly held on to his own life

for just another day. Every child could see that Berlin was no medieval fortress, but Hitler wanted to hang on and live just another day.

Everyone is wise in hindsight. I had now ample time to wonder over my own past. Luckily, I was still alive. How could I have been so gullible as to ignore the possibility of losing the war for so long? I had to face it now. At no time, whilst I was in uniform, did I contemplate defeat.

It was propaganda! It was Political Correctness! Drummed into me at an early age. It was brainwashing done to children whilst they were in school! That is the best time to turn people into robots, at an early age.

One day I got an old copy of a *Time Magazine* and read it. By then I was already fluent in English, including all the seductive phrases necessary for a sailor.

What I read sent my head spinning.

Hitler had a girl, Eva Braun!

Not *our* Hitler, who was high above such weaknesses. Hitlers do not have girls. They are created to lead nations. I could not imagine him even needing sleep, let alone flirting with a girl.

More shocking news on other pages. Concentration camps! I knew they had been there, but not that they were full of Jews. And they had been killed. Who can do such a thing? Not men like Rydzewski or Wicha-  
mann, they could not kill a fly. They only could shoot ships.

Maybe it all was propaganda after all.

Nobody I knew had ever spoken about Jews being killed in Germany. Not by Hitler, who was a vegetarian because he hated killing animals.

Of course, I remembered the *Kristallnacht*, where Jewish shop windows were smashed, but that was different. Smashing shop windows facilitates looting and that attracts many hoodlums. It happens everywhere, at protest meetings, or when a lynch mob assembles. A mass of people can easily be steered in the wrong direction—but incinerating Jews in Auschwitz? How can a government do this without anybody knowing about that?

I had been a soldier, righteously defending my country against an enemy who had declared war on us. It would still take a while before I would become a cynic and realise that all politics are based on lies.

I realised that I, like most Germans, had been conned by Hitler. Until the very end we had believed in him and his sincerity. We had believed that we were fighting a just war, against an enemy who had declared war on Germany, and that we had to defend our Fatherland, whilst all the

time we had been used by Hitler in his quest to go into history as one of the greatest statesmen.

He did not even care for the German people. To him, a German soldier was stripped of all humanity. A soldier was not a father, a brother, or a son. He was just an honourable being to be put into a spot, which he then defended to his death. To retreat from this post to save his life was unthinkable in the eyes of Hitler.

With the sinking of my boat I had already separated from Hitler's war machinery, but I still was under his spell. Germany was already being trampled on by our enemies and none of us contemplated defeat. Such was the hypnotic influence of Hitler.

**M**y release from Nazi Germany was gradual. One cannot be a proud German, holding his head up high like a present day American, knowing we're the biggest, the smartest, the strongest one day and crawling like a beaten dog the next.

To the men at the base, the capitulation of Germany was kept secret. The Japanese had confiscated all short wave radios in their occupation zone, and only at the German Navy base were some short wave radios to be found.

Early in April, the base commander, Kapitän Kandler, gave me the order to cut the short wave coil out of all the radios at the base. I left mine functioning. At night I sat alone in front of my radio and heard, horrified, how that world, as I had known it, collapsed around me. Goebbels was still there, confident and promising that we would never be beaten. One day Hitler's voice was missing, and then Goebbel's voice fell silent, too. Another voice told me a few days later that all were dead and Germany had surrendered.

Confused I looked around. Germany was no more. I felt like a fish without water. Until now I had possessed a home to return to after the war and now that should be no more?

The Navy at our base still said nothing. We were told to pack up all our belongings and move to a tea plantation in the mountains of Tjikopo.

"I don't want to go," I said to Hans Biermann, who helped me packing in my workshop. Biermann was a middle aged man. Before the war he had been in the galley of merchant ships and had ended up as smut

on the raider *Michel*, which was sunk near Japan. In Djakarta he had managed the kitchen at the base.

"Well, what will you do?" Biermann grumbled. "I cursed the day I became a soldier and hated every day since they slapped a uniform on me. Give me the wide blue sea and a good ship under my feet. I hate to be a soldier."

His sea-blue eyes searched for the far horizon, but the view was obstructed by some coconut trees.

"But we are not soldiers any more," I informed him. "I swore allegiance to Adolf Hitler and he's dead, so where does that leave us?"

"Dead?" Biermann put a box with radio components on my work bench. "You mean he's not alive any more?"

"That's what I mean when I say he's dead."

Biermann's face lit up as he shoved that box back on the table. "Then the war is over," he beamed. "A ship—I must find myself a ship."

He headed for the exit door, but bumped into Lieutenant Karotki, who was the administration officer of the base.

"What are you two up to," the officer demanded. "Hurry up. The truck is waiting."

"I'm not going anywhere in your truck," Biermann snarled. "Why didn't you tell us this blasted war is over?" He shoved Karotki aside and stormed out. The smaller Karotki could not restrain Biermann and called for the guard. When the guard came, Biermann was gone.

"Arrest Baudzus," Karotki ordered, enraged. "Lock him in the cell and throw away the key."

Confused, the guard took my arm and led me away. He had been a pal of mine, and thus far there had been no hostilities at the base.

The cell was a flimsy storage shed where drunken sailors, sometimes picked up ashore, slept their booze off. Lonely and discouraged, I sat down on one of the bunks and thought about my future. I was no revolutionary. I just wanted to be a civilian again and continue my interrupted life.

I had not long to wait. Half an hour later I was joined by Biermann. He had two disciples in tow. They were Engels, the smut, and a sailor, both from *U-219*, who both had seen enough of the war.

The four of us discussed the upheaval in world politics until late in the evening and the mosquitoes became a nuisance. In Djakarta the mosquitoes were not only a nuisance, they were deadly and carried malaria.

It was irresponsible of Karotki to lock us up without a mosquito net.

No harm done.

Biermann pushed the flimsy door open and we went into our own bedroom to sleep under a mosquito net. The next morning Karotki collected us and handed us over to a Japanese patrol.

No European was permitted to walk the streets in Japanese occupied territory except German soldiers, and we were not German soldiers any more. There was no hope that Biermann could get himself a ship in these waters.

We were carted to the Tenth Bat POW camp, which housed Allied POW's, mainly Australians. Biermann understood Malay, so he translated the house rules to us, after we were put into a separate cell for the four of us.

"We are to bow deeply when the guard comes in," he fumed. "I bow for no bloody Japanese."

We discussed this point thoroughly and agreed with him. At last we decided that the guard had to be greeted somehow, but when he comes in, we would line up and greet him with the Nazi salute, which was still familiar to us.

It worked.

At first the guards were startled, then smiling, amused, they accepted that we were different.

Life in the prison camp was not too bad—that is if you can swallow vegetable soup with carrion pieces and maggots floating in it. I just closed my eyes and swallowed the calories.

Our regular guards were normal human beings. One was a fat Japanese, the other one a tall Korean. They still believed in Japanese victory, just as I had never considered that Germany could ever be defeated. The Japanese showed me his little finger and said, "Such a little bomb has Germany given us. We can blow a whole town up with it."

They did have some sense of humour and compassion. They owned a female sausage dog with very short legs. One day that dog fell in love, but the only male around had very long legs. No trouble. The two soldiers build a scaffolding for the sausage dog and invited us to witness the consummation of their love.

Our incarceration there lasted only six weeks, then we were transferred to the 15<sup>th</sup> Bat in Bandung, which housed Dutch civilians.

Here, everything was much the same as in the Djakarta camp. Again

we had to train the guards to accept our Nazi salute instead of a deep Japanese bow, which they accepted, startled. Obviously there was nothing like this in their book of rules, so here we lived on a diet of maggots for another six weeks.

One day the gates of the camp were thrown open. The war had ended.

Hurrah!

Now Biermann could get his ship and I could restart my interrupted civilian life—become a big shot of some sort. My plans for the future as a civilian were still hazy. Operating the controls of a U-boat was all I knew.

Elated, we walked out of the camp, but we did not walk far. Bandung was in the tight grip of Indonesian rebels. For more than 300 years the Dutch had occupied this country and twenty generations had not yet erased the desire to be ruled by their own kings and nobility. Enthusiastically, they scrambled around their Sultan in Jogjakarta, determined to drive the Dutch back to where they had come from.

The road to Djakarta was crawling with street robbers and rebel soldiers and Bandung was in a stranglehold. Only a small section, around the Dutch camp and the Japanese POW camp, could be defended by the English and their Ghurkas.

Biermann had to forget about his ship. He found employment at the Schroeder Meatworks, which previously had supplied the U-boat bases with tinned meat. Engels, the smut from *U-219*, and his sailor comrade found employment, too. Engels had been a butcher in pre-war times and now it came in handy.

There was no contact with the outside world. The camp was supplied by parachute drops from a Catalina and the Dutch camp authorities did not give me anything to eat. Fortunately, I still had some money and possessions, which the Japanese had not taken from me.

The noose around Bandung grew tighter and tighter, and in his desperation the English commander opened the Japanese POW gates to get help from the Japanese.

It worked instantly.

The rebels had no fear of any Western power, but were not game to tackle the Japanese. Just one lonely Japanese at every crossroad, leaning on a (probably unloaded) rifle was enough to drive the rebels away.

For six months I stumbled along, finding my way in this new life as a civilian, then the English discovered me. I had been under their noses all

along, listed as a civilian I had to report once a week to the English garrison. I must have been a bad civilian, for one day they found my militaristic core. All four of us were rounded up and sent by train to Djakarta.

There we were locked up in the concrete bunkers of Glodock jail, where we were (surprise, surprise) reunited with the 250 comrades from the Djakarta Navy Base.

My civilian days were over.

I was in the Navy again.

Glodock was a real jail, designed to house murderers. Each concrete cell had four bunks and one latrine bucket. Any additional piece of furniture would have been luxury. Once a day we could walk for an hour in a circle in the yard. We had no other contact with each other. The only improvement on the Japanese camp was that there were no maggots in the food. I learned that tea could be drunk with milk, in the English way. The biscuits with corned beef, too, were very English.

Another six weeks I lived like this, then one day we were loaded onto a truck, from there on a trawler (Biermann must have been deliriously happy) and we headed out north to the far horizon, beyond which, somewhere was Germany.

But we did not go to Germany. We were unloaded at a small island, a little bigger than the ones in my cartoons.

The island was called Onrust, less than 1,000 metres across with four barracks on it. Each barrack had its own barbed wire fence surrounding it and would be our habitat for most of 1946.

At last I was to return to Germany.

It was late in 1946. My Fatherland was no more. As Goebbels had threatened, we should have won the war. Now we had to relive the Treaty of Versailles.

Worse!

My treasured Lyck, where my ancestors had lived for 10,000 years, was no more. It was Poland now, along with the whole of East Prussia and a large piece of Germany as well. The indigenous population was driven out and the land repopulated with Poles from the south.

Whatever was left of Germany was just a pile of rubbish created by the bombs from England and America. Any machinery still standing was dismantled and carried away overseas. The German people were left with

nothing to their credit. Just as the German propaganda machine had threatened.

My parents survived the war, but my father never saw the Volkswagen he had paid for with his savings account. His money had been used to finance Hitler's war.

Then followed more recriminations at the war crimes trials in Nürnberg. Generals were hanged for fighting a war which was declared by others. Even Krupp was sentenced for building cannons. Obviously only Allied works were permitted to build cannons without being prosecuted.

That is how I saw the world when I decided to leave my mutilated Fatherland and see how the others in the world managed to live.

The good ones.

Soon I recognised the monster that did all the killing.

It was political correctness.

Hitler dictated political correctness on one side and Churchill did the same on the other. All soldiers could kill each other without ever breaking the law. Of course, it all was made palatable in a subtle way. They were not people I killed during the war. They were just ships I shot. A fighter pilot does not aim his deadly guns at a fellow pilot who happens to be flying under different colours. He just shoots down another aeroplane. A gunner does not train his gun at people, he aims at the enemy.

That was how it all happened.